Commentary
October 2008

# Putin and the Polite Pundits

*Arthur Herman*

THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

## Obama's Leftism

*Joshua Muravchik*

## Honor versus Unity

*Laurence D. Cooper*

## Forgetting Zion

*Ruth R. Wisse*

## Whatever Happened to Marc Chagall?

*Michael J. Lewis*

## How Not to Write About Iraq

*Jonathan Foreman*

## Art, Artlessness, and Hollywood

*Terry Teachout*

**Books in Review**

*L. Gordon Crovitz • John Gross • Cheryl Strauss Einhorn*
*Eric Trager • John Steele Gordon • Jeff Jacoby*

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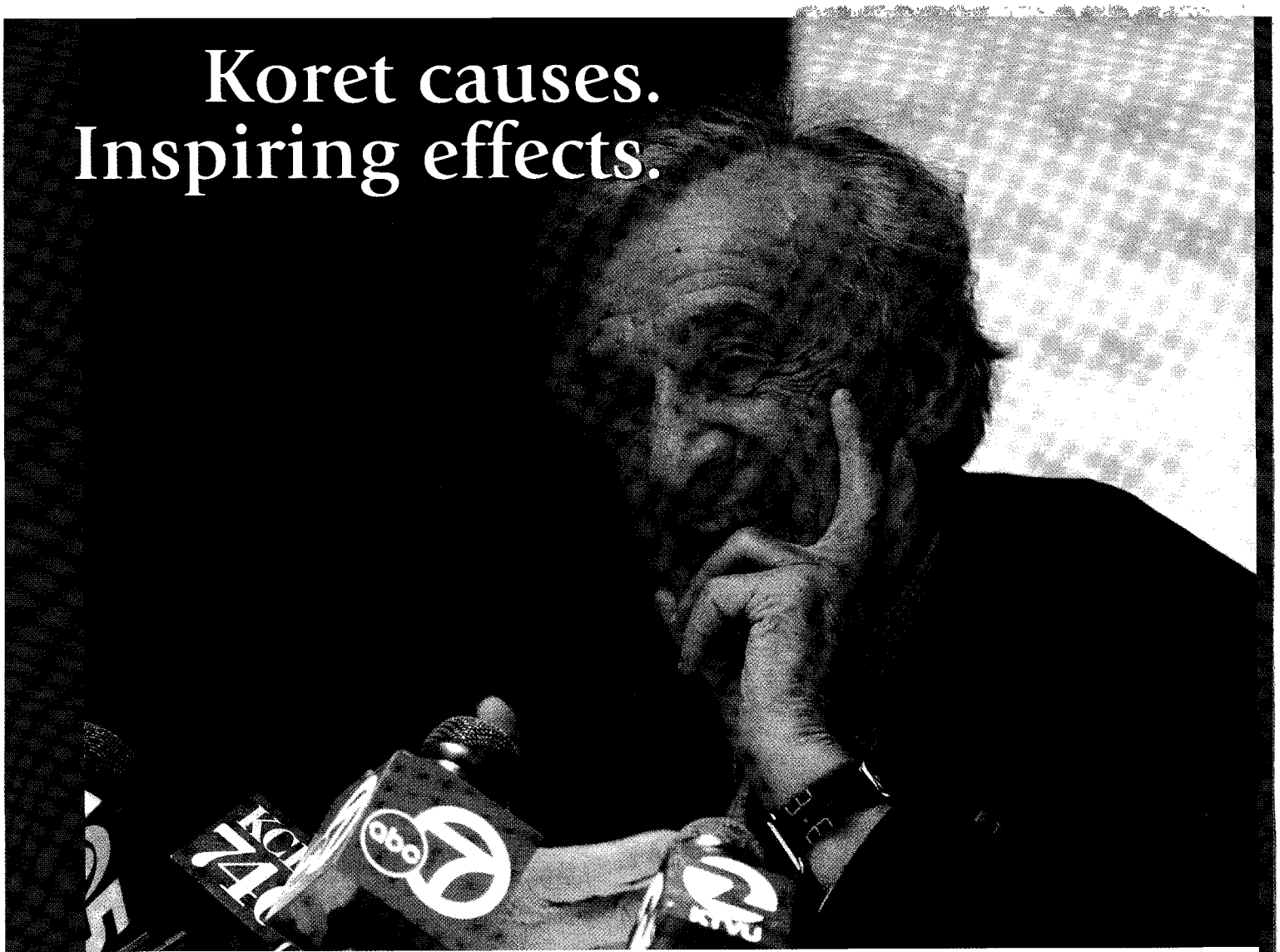

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Commentary
October 2008

# Letters from Readers

## Colorblind Society?

To the Editor:

Linda Chavez argues quite plausibly that black-white relations have never been better, adducing among other things the fact of Barack Obama's candidacy for President ["Let Us by All Means Have an Honest Conversation About Race," June]. But she then takes this claim much further, stating that "barriers on race have essentially disappeared." She concludes by rehearsing a number of problems with black racial politics that in her view Obama has failed to confront. Thus, too many African Americans deny the role that the "decline of the black family" has played in African-American violence, poor educational performance, and poverty. Instead, they fasten onto destructive conspiracy theories that blame whites for everything from AIDS to drug distribution to poor school performance.

I would like to address the final portion of this argument. Collective responses to "victimhood" have always been fraught. Jewish communities generally reacted to the Holocaust with resolve against victimhood itself ("Never Again!").

This commitment has been expressed in numerous ways, from memorializing the Holocaust to vigilance about anti-Semitism to countering stereotypical images of the Jew, including especially the image of the defenseless Jew. Such reactions found fertile ground for development in the new Jewish culture of the state of Israel. But the determination never to be victimized has raised new problems: as a national majority in Israel, Jews could now be victimizers. Although this might be regarded as a negative development—and it has been at times—the rejection of victimhood is a necessary moment in the struggle against persecution.

African Americans have had their own great history of revolt against victimhood. The Christian call to turn the other cheek found its breaking point with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. From that moment, African-Americans doubted that the reason and decency to which they were exhorted could protect them. Movements for "Black Power" and "Black Beauty" were born. But unlike Israeli Jews, African Americans could have no army of their own. The fate of the Black Panthers proved that: their toughness was criminalized.

The process of reclaiming African-American pride was sometimes in tension with nationalistic appeals for American unity. As the most discriminated-against minority of a cold-war power, African Americans attracted allies (often unsought) from the U.S. "enemy camp," and Soviet, Chinese, and Cuban Communists called for solidarity with their plight. Black politicians became vulnerable to the accusation of anti-Americanism.

We find distant echoes of this dynamic in the Reverend Wright affair, but we should remember that easy identification with the nation is never possible for long-discriminated-against minorities, in the U.S. or anywhere else. Persecuted groups retain a sense of their vulnerability.

So, while dealing with "paranoia" that is out of step with contemporary reality is critically important, denying its basis in historical fact and in contemporary fears is not productive. I find little sensitivity to this matter in Linda Chavez's article, which suggests that racism in the United States is basically a thing of the past.

Besides aiding the process of racial conciliation within the U.S., Obama's candidacy has also had a powerfully ameliorating effect on the troubling growth of anti-Americanism abroad.



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The latter has been fanned by the obscene American habits of memorializing only America's own dead while ignoring all others, of counting only its own losses, and of celebrating only its own victories. As the product of a new racial dispensation that Linda Chavez at least partially acknowledges, the Obama phenomenon demonstrates that the U.S. can still be a wellspring of transformation and improvement.

CLAUDIO LOMNITZ
*Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race*
*Columbia University*
*New York City*

TO THE EDITOR:

Linda Chavez's invitation to a no-holds-barred conversation about race in America should be welcomed by all who seek genuine solutions for the persistent racial divides that continue to threaten the national fabric. But the terms of such a conversation are substantially more complex (and potentially reputation-threatening) for anyone daring to challenge deeply fortified taboos surrounding how this oldest of national dilemmas may be discussed.

For the past half-century, we have tottered between two mainstream approaches to the race issue. On the whole, liberals have concluded that an activist welfare state that focuses on uprooting all vestiges of past and current white prejudice will eventually lead to a generation of African Americans being endowed with the full scope of opportunity that was promised by the founders to all of America's sons and daughters.

Beginning in the 1960's, this liberal consensus has been challenged by a number of factors, including the findings of the Moynihan Report and other important studies of the black community; a decidedly militant, anti-integrationist turn in segments of the civil-rights movement toward separatism and "Black Power"; exploding urban race riots and the rise of inter generational welfare dependency; and the divided liberal conscience regarding the justice of race-specific preferential treatment.

Collectively, these developments radically deflated the euphoric expectations maintained in the wake of the 1954 *Brown* decision and the 1964-65 civil-rights legislation. Yes, governmental action had by all accounts been effective, but it had hardly brought about the liberal utopia of an equal-opportunity society. New divisions had also hardened with worsening indicators of illegitimate births, incidence of crime, and educational deficits in the black community.

Lying in wait and yet to be fully implemented has been the second paradigm, the libertarian/conservative one, whose roots go back to Booker T. Washington and forward to the likes of Thomas Sowell, Glenn Loury, Walter Williams, Ward Connerly, and Linda Chavez herself. For them, the principal culprit for the lingering problems in the black community is self-defeating attitudes and behaviors such as have led to the disintegration of the black family unit.

Thus, to foster a truly colorblind and equal-opportunity society, Linda Chavez would like to see the dismantling of racial preferences in education, employment, and contracts; the avoidance of scapegoating white America; and a revivification among blacks of the values of work, industry, and familial responsibility that have worked for America's other successful racial-ethnic groups.

This paradigm certainly deserves its due, and is likely, owing to the exhaustion of liberal remedies, to experience a near-term renaissance. But a broadened conversation on race might suggest even more forcefully that her libertarian vision is not supported by evidence, or at the very least has not yet contended with scholarly research that questions its applicability to persons of all racial groups.

Is it possible, one might ask, that Linda Chavez's recipe is unrealistic, as well as undesired by the very black Americans she seeks to win to the cause of a race-blindness? Is it possible that *both* liberals and libertarian conservatives mistakenly oppose a race-conscious approach? Should our national conversation not include voices who on the basis of scientific evidence question whether the integrationist ideal of white liberals is feasible, or voices who presume that the biological and genetic reality of race differences has compelling sociological and policy consequences?

PAUL KAMOLNICK
*East Tennessee State University*
*Johnson City, Tennessee*

TO THE EDITOR:

Linda Chavez argues that Barack Obama's heralded speech about race in March did not live up to its billing as a candid statement on the matter. As she sees it, a participant in an honest conversation about race would acknowledge the enormous progress that our country has made in black-white relations, in elevating the socioeconomic station of the black community as a whole, and in stretching the limits of fairness (by way of racial preferences) in order to foster such progress. Her interlocutor would also acknowledge that by far the largest barriers to continued progress for blacks have more to do with indigenous problems in the black community—crime, fatherless families, etc.—than with any vestiges of white racism. By this last measure in particular Obama failed, especially with his refusal to repudiate Rev. Jeremiah Wright in stronger terms.

Since the appearance of Linda Chavez's article, Obama has in fact repudiated Wright (even if only under pressure), and he has spoken forthrightly to black audiences about the crisis in the black family. All of this is to his credit, as I am sure Linda Chavez would acknowledge. As for the speech, I did not find it as objectionable as she did. One must judge it in light of what has preceded it, and Obama in fact went farther than any other American politician has gone.

Obama spoke about resentment on the part of blacks over racism as well as resentment on the part of whites over racial preferences; has any mainstream politician ever touched the latter? His validation of the legitimate feelings of blacks and whites was polite and democratic, and his call for Americans of all races to unite was inspiring. Did Linda Chavez expect this consummate liberal to deliver a stinging indictment of the black community for



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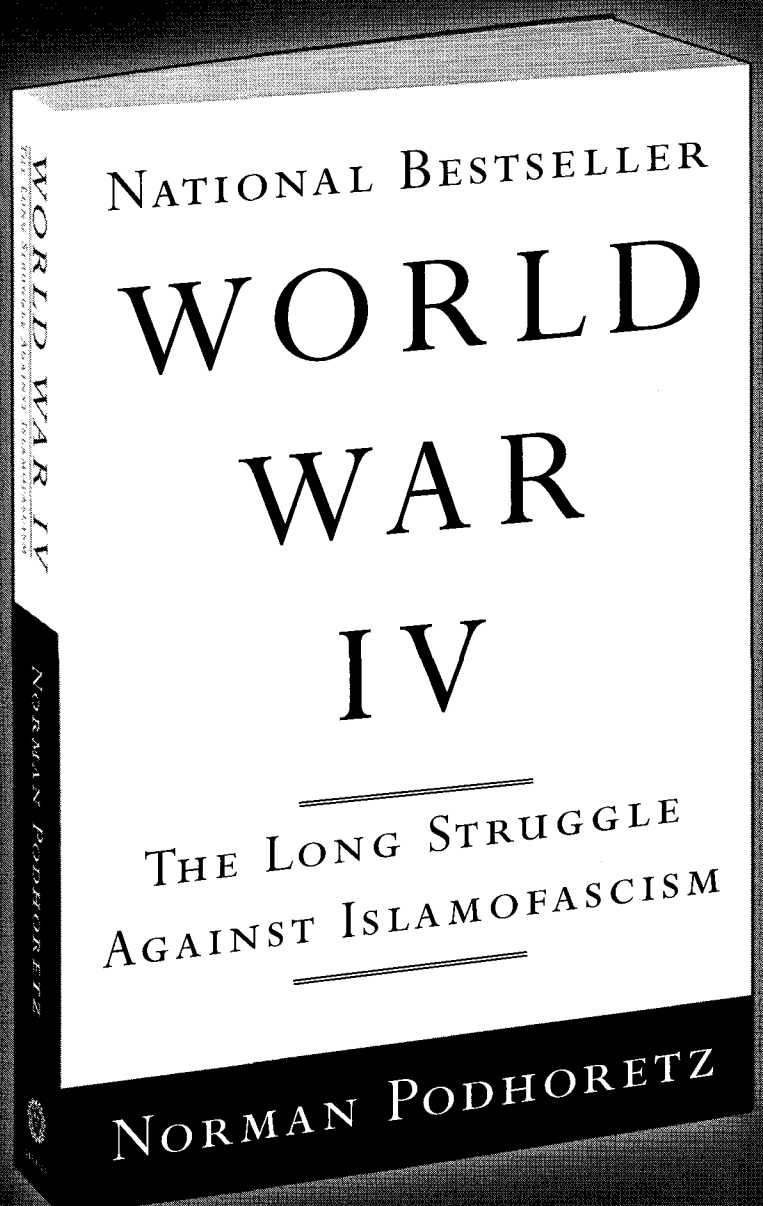


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social pathologies in the inner cities?

The real problem with Obama's speech is that it was light on politics. Martin Luther King, Jr. was no politician, yet his "I Have a Dream" speech, to which Obama's speech has been compared, listed concrete objectives—an end to Jim Crow laws, for one—alongside its call to hearts and minds. Obama said not a word about the policies that in his mind would facilitate his goal of racial harmony. The evidence from his campaign platform is that he favors maintaining racial preferences, which at best have been shown to help only a small, elite section of the black community and which (as he acknowledges) are a source of resentment among the "dis-preferred." Obama seems remarkably innocent of the fact that political dreams are borne out only by sound policies, and that policymaking inevitably involves tough tradeoffs. So far, the electorate does not seem to mind.

PETER BRUNO
*Wichita, Kansas*

LINDA CHAVEZ writes:

I am bewildered by Claudio Lomnitz's critique of my article. Where to begin? Does he really believe that the Black Panthers were "criminalized" for their "toughness"? As I recall, members of the group were prosecuted and convicted of murder and robbery, among other crimes, not for organizing a revolt against black victimhood. And what point, exactly, is he making when he says that "unlike Israeli Jews, African Americans could have no army of their own"? Surely he is not suggesting that ethnic and racial groups within the United States should be able to form their own armies. To what end?

Perhaps most telling is Mr. Lomnitz's assertion that anti-Americanism is the product of what he calls "the obscene American habits of memorializing only America's own dead while ignoring all others, of counting only its own losses, and of celebrating only its own victories." The only obscenity here is his calumny against American generosity and sacrifice. What other nation in the course of history has sacrificed as many lives of its own countrymen to secure freedom for others?

Paul Kamolnick raises an interesting question: can we have an honest discussion about race without at least acknowledging the debate over the role of genetics in different performance outcomes among groups? But leaving aside the question of whether and how much genes do explain such differences, should the answer to that question affect our laws? Mr. Kamolnick implies that my colorblind approach to public policy could be seen to fall short—but what would he propose in its place? Should the Fourteenth Amendment guarantee of equal protection of the law for all individuals be modified? Would he have us revoke the Civil Rights Act prohibition against race discrimination because the "integrationist ideal" is, in his view, unfeasible? I would hope not.

Whatever "sound scientific evidence" of race differences Mr. Kamolnick feels should become part of the national conversation, it is important to remember that individual differences within groups are far greater than differences among groups—something Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein pointed to time and again in *The Bell Curve*. Promoting policies that treat individuals as if they were merely representatives of groups is antithetical to our legal and moral traditions. This nation was founded on the principle that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights; this is no taboo to be blown up in search of a "broadened" conversation on race.

I would take issue with one point in Peter Bruno's letter. He suggests that no mainstream politician has matched Barack Obama's candor in discussing white resentment over racial preferences. In fact, Republicans have appealed to white voters on this issue for decades. Still, Republicans have done precious little to eliminate such preferences when they have been in power. Bill Clinton talked about the need to "mend" affirmative action, but he, too, took little action. Mr. Bruno's assessment that Barack Obama's approach fails adequately to acknowledge "that political dreams are borne out only by sound policies, and that policymaking inevitably involves tough tradeoffs," is certainly true—but it is a lesson that politicians of both parties have failed to heed.

## Moral of the Stories

TO THE EDITOR:

Cheryl Miller raises an important question in her essay "Why Malamud Fad-

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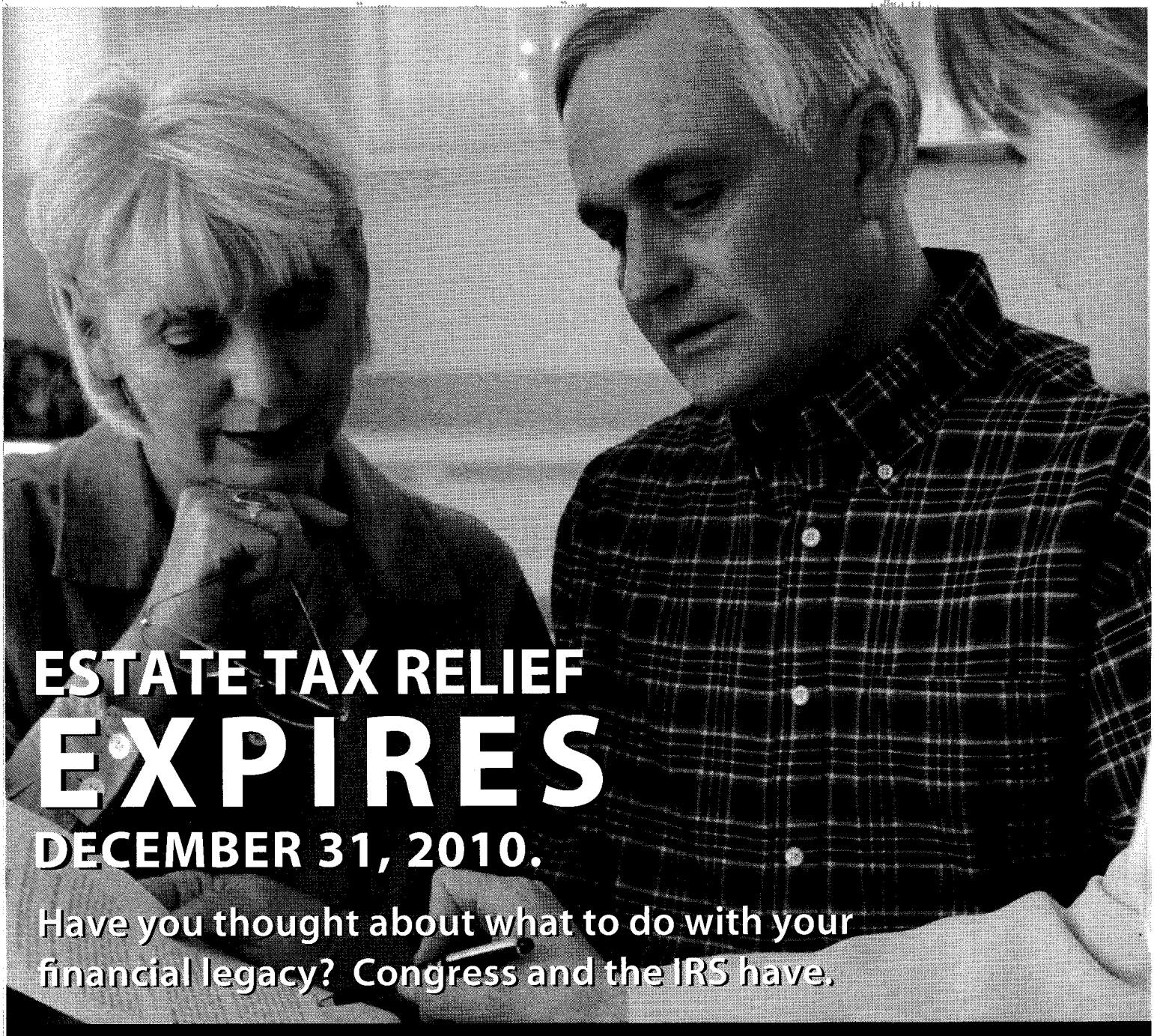

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ed" [June]. That question is not so much the desperate one implicit in her title; I am not convinced that Malamud has truly faded, and certainly not any more than many other American writers who received praise and honors during their lifetime but now seem figures of another era. (Consider other former National Book Award winners like Walker Percy, Jerzy Kosinski, or Katherine Anne Porter, all of whom are still treasured by a select audience but have been largely displaced by contemporary writers.)

The truly interesting question concerns the specific value of reading Malamud today. Now that the facts are out about Malamud himself—the biography has been written, along with a memoir by his daughter—the character that emerges is not so much the paragon of restraint and social virtue presented by Cheryl Miller, who aligns Malamud with "the need for renunciation, of forgoing the demands of appetite." Instead, we find a writer endlessly concerned for our ethical well-being but equally unwilling to rest assured in any fixed set of moral precepts. What Malamud's work presents is not so much a doctrine, and certainly not a set of platitudes, but a moral challenge to open ourselves authentically to one another.

Consider the stories in the outstanding collection *The Magic Barrel* (1958). Each revolves around a central and decisive encounter between two figures. The first of these figures is sympathetic, but turns out to be morally blind in crucial ways. The second figure is usually shrouded in some sort of mystery; often this is someone who suffers profoundly but refuses to be consoled by any clear-cut formula (see "Take Pity," "The Mourners," and "The Last Mohican"). Confronted with the mystery of human need, the first character must come to a deeper understanding of the true meaning of compassion. This journey often leads toward self-knowledge. In "The Mourners," a landlord realizes that it is he himself—not only his insufferable tenant—who must repent for his sins; in "The Last Mohican," the failed artist Fiedelman wanders all night through the ghetto of Rome and visits a Jewish cemetery before glimpsing his own failings as a human being.

But Malamud is hardly optimistic about the possibility of achieving a genuine moral transformation. He knows all too well the tendency of human beings to cling self-righteously to their preconceived notions and so-called principles. To see just how complex and ambiguous Malamud's stories often turn out to be, consider the title story in *The Magic Barrel*, which Cheryl Miller enthusiastically wraps into her thesis while forgetting to mention its chilling coda, which throws into doubt the moral victory that she attributes to the rabbinical-student protagonist Finkle. When he resolves to pursue the hand of the matchmaker's daughter—seemingly embracing what Miller calls "the choice that has been chosen for you"—the matchmaker huddles around the corner, "chant[ing] prayers for the dead." Having seemingly resolved the dilemma of his inability to love, Finkle has come upon new dilemmas. The reader is left only with foreboding.

To explain why Malamud seems out of sync with today's culture, Cheryl Miller argues that in the permissive culture of post-1960's America, readers shun moral exhortation. Maybe so. But, then again, the writers who truly matter to us seldom do so on account of their exhortations. Malamud's enduring value consists in his forcing readers to imagine the encounter with the Other as an endlessly complex, potentially redeeming, though often frustrating trial. He shows that just when we think we have it all figured out, we still might have missed the crucial point. Someone may be praying for our soul.

JULIAN LEVINSON
*University of Michigan*
*Ann Arbor, Michigan*

CHERYL MILLER writes:

I thank Julian Levinson for his thoughtful comments. About the moral seriousness of Malamud's work and its concern (in Mr. Levinson's words) "for our ethical well-being," we are in agreement. But Mr. Levinson feels that I oversimplify, reducing Malamud to a "paragon of restraint and social virtue" and his ideas to a moral "doctrine" or, worse, a "set of platitudes." In fact, Malamud is complex, and he does not sermonize.

I concede both points, but I plead innocent to the charge. (Anyway, Mr. Levinson himself is not above imputing "moral precepts" to Malamud's work: we must be compassionate, we must strive for self-knowledge, we must try to understand the "Other.") I noted in my essay that Malamud was hardly a paragon of virtue, social or otherwise, and I never argued that he believed human problems could be solved according to some "clear-cut formula." Malamud's stories illustrate powerfully "how hard it is to be moral" (as one of his characters puts it), and how difficult a genuine moral transformation is to achieve.

Doing the just thing exacts a high price from Malamud's characters. In *The Assistant*, Frank Alpine resigns himself to working at a grocery for the rest of his life as penance to the proprietors whom he had assailed. In *A New Life*, Seymour Levin marries a woman he is not sure he loves in order to fulfill a promise. And in the "The Magic Barrel," as Mr. Levinson notes, the curtain-lowering prayers for the dead complicate Finkle's moral victory.

But it is still a victory. And costly as his and others' moral choices are, Malamud's stories insist, gently and obliquely, that they be made just the same. The alternative is to sink further into selfishness and degradation. This tragic reality is the source of Malamud's power, and the bedrock of a moral universe.

## Lost & Found in Translation

TO THE EDITOR:

Hillel Halkin has once again presented a thoughtful, illuminating essay on the Jewish cultural situation ["The Translator's Paradox," June]. The lamentable decline in Hebrew-language



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Dr. Malcolm David Eckel is Associate Professor of Religion at Boston University. He earned his Masters in Theology at Oxford and Ph.D. in the study of comparative religion at Harvard. In 1998, Professor Eckel received the Metcalf Award for Teaching Excellence, his university's highest award for teaching.

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fluency outside of Israel is indeed not likely to be reversed in the near future. Totally original to me was his idea that with the loss of a distinctively Jewish language, Jews have no real way of speaking to each other without being overheard. A dimension of special communal connection and intimacy is lost. But I am somewhat reserved about the notion floated by Mr. Halkin that English translations have obviated the need for real knowledge of the Hebrew original. After all, many of the most important Hebrew texts are poetic, and by not nature not completely translatable.

SHALOM FREEDMAN
*Jerusalem, Israel*

TO THE EDITOR:

Hillel Halkin's reference to an editor's lament about the "archaisms and crudities in language" that have "often vitiated Hebrew literature in English" put me in mind of an anecdote that made me appreciate the value of *maintaining* such archaisms. Once, while visiting Israel, I was watching an imported American sit-com on television, broadcast in English with Hebrew subtitles. When one character exclaimed to another, "What's that got to do with it?," the Hebrew phrase that flashed onscreen was pulled verbatim from a well-known midrash that puzzles over a jarring juxtaposition of themes in the Bible: "What does the sabbatical year have to do with Mount Sinai?"

Here was a wonderfully archaic idiom with more force than any literal translation into Hebrew of the abstract question in English. This is but one amusing example, but it suggests that when rich associations or concrete images are leveled in translation from Hebrew to English, something essential is lost.

ALAN A. MAZUREK
*Great Neck, New York*

TO THE EDITOR:

A note on Hillel Halkin's meditation on what is lost and gained in translation from Hebrew to English. Only by reading in Hebrew does one truly feel the rhythmic opposition of "pronounal" suffixes that pervade biblical and liturgical literature. Hebrew's one-word "*vetzivanu*" is very different from English's "and [God] commanded us"; only the former builds the atmosphere of human-divine dialogue that Buber wrote so much about.

If in the future only rabbis and scholars in America will know Hebrew, Judaism could easily turn into one of the stranger dishes in an increasingly motley smorgasbord of American religious life. One sprout of hope, which Mr. Halkin notes well, is the growing interest in Hebrew on the part of Christians. An unusual number of Christians attend my various Hebrew programs in California. If Hebrew is going to be one dish among many, it had better be as tasty as possible to as many tasters as possible.

ZEV BAR-LEV
*San Diego, California*

TO THE EDITOR:

I would question Hillel Halkin's statement that Hebrew was until recently the second language and lingua franca of educated Jews. Hebrew as a second language came about only as an act of will. The historian Anita Shapira has noted that among Zionist immigrants to Palestine in the early part of the 20th century, Russian and Yiddish were the preferred languages. Even a pioneering Hebrew author like Yosef Haim Brenner (1881-1921) struggled with the spoken language. Everyday dialogue had to be invented. Educated Diaspora Jews like Herzl, Brandeis, Einstein, Emma Lazarus, and Felix Frankfurter could not order a sandwich in Hebrew, and probably could not even say "I love you."

It is wonderful that Hebrew works in translation enjoy a wide audience today. But I would question Mr. Halkin's assumption that these can furnish an English speaker with a Jewish education. Translations are a great way to reach non-Jews and to generate enthusiasm for Hebrew literature, but without a reborn Hebrew culture in the Diaspora, it is doubtful that Jewish cultural uniqueness can be maintained.

AMI ISSEROFF
*Rehovot, Israel*

TO THE EDITOR:

Hillel Halkin's assertion that Hebrew has been displaced as the lingua franca of the Jewish world is not true with respect to Argentina, where I recently visited. Wherever in the Jewish community I had occasion to be—synagogues, communal centers, eateries—I found Hebrew to be the language of choice. Perhaps Hebraists—and American Jewish educators—have something crucial to learn from the educational and cultural practices of this active Diaspora community.

SEYMOUR MAYNE
*Ottawa, Canada*

HILLEL HALKIN writes:

I could not agree more with Shalom Freedman, Alan A. Mazurek, and Zev bar-Lev that English translations of Hebrew texts, particularly of those sacred to Judaism, are inadequate substitutes for the originals. When I wrote that it is now possible to get a "thorough Jewish education" entirely in English, I was certainly not implying that such an education fulfilled any kind of Jewish ideal. The ideal, I believe, should continue to be the same high level of Hebrew literacy that prevailed in the past.

In pointing out that Herzl, Brandeis, Einstein, Emma Lazarus, Felix Frankfurter, and numerous other committed Jews of the modern age knew little or no Hebrew, Ami Isseroff is of course correct. The Herzls, Brandeises, and Einsteins did not acquire their educations within the institutional framework of the Jewish community, and the fact that they did not is one of the features of Jewish modernity. In pre-modern times, however, a Jew could be educated only within such a framework, which called for a reading and writing knowledge of Hebrew. Herzls, Brandeises, and Einsteins are practically impossible to find before the 19th century. Even Spinoza knew Hebrew well before he forgot it or pretended to forget it.

I am glad to hear from Seymour Mayne that Hebrew is flourishing in Argentina. It would be interesting to know more about why this is so and what applications it might have for elsewhere in the Diaspora.



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Commentary
October 2008

# Putin and the Polite Pundits

*Arthur Herman*

On September 1, the leaders of the European Union, having already warned Moscow several times of its obligation to meet the terms of the cease-fire agreement with Georgia, held an emergency meeting in Brussels and decided to—issue another warning. If Russia continues its non-compliance, the leaders threatened, another warning may yet follow.

Such are the pitiful realities of international diplomacy, and of an all too familiar Western pattern of response to acts of blatant aggression by powerful dictators. It is embarrassing enough when governments, with responsibility for the security of millions, resort to such hand-wringing hesitancy. It is worse when analysts and critics who are free to speak their minds on everything under the sun start looking for reasons to avoid placing blame for aggression squarely where it belongs—on the aggressors—and instead strive conspicuously to spread it around among the bystanders and even the victims.

Such was the response to Russia's August 9 invasion of the pro-Western democracy of Georgia by the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman. Under the title "What Did We Expect?," Friedman dutifully awarded an Olympic-style gold medal for "brutal stupidity"—stupidity, not criminality—to Vladimir Putin, the man who actually sent in the troops and tanks. But then Friedman quickly went on to confer a silver medal for "bone-headed recklessness" on Mikheil Saakashvili, the president of Georgia, whose country suffered the attack. The bronze for "short-sightedness" went, needless to say, to George W. Bush (shared, retroactively, with Bill Clinton).

Friedman's reasoning went like this. By trying "to cram NATO expansion down the Russians' throats," the United States had mortally injured the feelings of the former superpower, a nation still smarting from defeat in the cold war. As if that were not provocation enough, Russia now confronts the prospect of former Soviet republics like Estonia, Ukraine, and Georgia joining the community of liberal democracies, and has also been asked to tolerate an anti-missile defense system the Bush administration wants to install across Eastern Europe. Offenses like these, Friedman wrote, had been "critical to fueling Putin's rise" to power, and they all but ensured a crisis like the one with Georgia. Friedman's views were echoed by, among others, former Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev, who as much as told the United States it could expect worse if it undertook to provoke Putin and Russia again.

And in what had Saakashvili's sin consisted? By daring to use military force to put down Russian-backed separatists in the breakaway Ossetian re-

Arthur Herman *is the author most recently of* Gandhi and Churchill: The Epic Rivalry that Destroyed an Empire and Forged Our Age *(Bantam Books). His essays in* Commentary *include "Why Iraq Was Inevitable" (July-August) and "Who Owns the Vietnam War?" (December 2007).*



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gion, he, too, had supposedly compelled Putin to invade. The *Economist*, denouncing Saakashvili as "an impetuous nationalist," did not shrink from calling *his* actions "foolish and possibly criminal." Michael Dobbs of the *Washington Post* wondered how the Georgians could have been guilty of such a gross "miscalculation"; they must have known that Russian peacekeepers would be killed or wounded in the fighting, thus inevitably triggering a harsh Russian response. And so forth.

In the weeks after the invasion, one would search long and hard for speculations of a different and arguably more pertinent sort. Why, for instance, have former Soviet-bloc nations like Poland, Ukraine, and Georgia been so anxious to get into NATO in the first place—or to have a missile-defense shield installed in their backyards? Who *were* those Russian "peacekeepers," and what were they doing in South Ossetia? How is it that Moscow was prepared to respond to the Georgian "provocation" with such massive force, and on such short notice?

We now know that Putin's troops had been on the move along the border of Georgia and the Ossetian region for weeks; that the Russians had been handing out Russian passports to Ossetian "citizens" for months, and since April had been preparing local railroad tracks for the movement of armored troop trains; and that, by August 8, at least 150 Russian tanks were poised for action on the border separating South and North Ossetia. What the evidence suggests is that, far from reacting defensively, Putin and the Russian president Dmitri Medvedev deliberately aimed to elicit Georgia's move into South Ossetia, aiming to exploit this as a pretext for wresting away both that region and Abkhazia to the west.

To be sure, no one, from Thomas Friedman to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to those European leaders meeting in Brussels, has any "illusions" about Putin. Almost from the day he came to high office in 2000, Western media, policy analysts, and politicians have acknowledged his multiple abuses of power, the corruption of his regime, and the spectacular failure of democratic hopes inside Russia. At the same time, however, and grumbling as they go, all have continued to acquiesce in the fact of Putin's dictatorship over post-Soviet Russia and his growing encroachment on the rights and territories of the newly independent but still sovereign countries around him. Indeed, the transparency of Putin's put-up job over Georgia, together with the West's so-far supine response, follows a pattern of its own, and it too has been discernible from the day he came to power.

VLADIMIR PUTIN broke onto the Russian national scene in 1996, at the age of forty-one. A former law student and KGB professional, he had been the political protégé of Anatoly Sobchak, the mayor of St. Petersburg and a leading advocate of Western-style rule of law during the chaotic years of Boris Yeltsin's presidency. Unlike many Russian politicians, Putin had lived abroad and could speak both German and English. Despite his KGB résumé, his early speeches were full of references to the need for democratic reform and for close ties between Russia and the West. When the faltering Yeltsin appointed him as his prime minister and successor in August 1999, it was largely in hopes that, as a lawyer with a Ph.D. in economics, Putin would carry out the necessary political and legal measures to correct the havoc resulting from the "shock therapy" of economic deregulation.

Little noted then or later was that Putin had gone to law school precisely in order to be recruited into the KGB. The secret-police agency, to which he would devote sixteen years of his life, exercised an enormous influence on him. Among other things, it bred a deep contempt for civil society and its governing norms; according to his biographer Richard Sakwa in *Putin: Russia's Choice* (2007), he became convinced that, for all the agency's ruthlessness and resort to systematic deception, the KGB was the only component of Soviet and, later, Russian society that actually worked and that enjoyed a sense of professional integrity. His entire political career may be seen as an extension of the lessons learned in those years.

This, however, was not how most Western analysts saw Putin when he assumed the presidency in 2000. To the Russian specialist Steven Solnick, for example, Putin was largely a transitional figure. He faced such enormous institutional constraints, including the legislated division of power between Russia's federal and provincial authorities, that he would likely accomplish little or nothing during his time in office. While acknowledging Putin's antidemocratic belief "that the needs of the state trump the rights of the individual," and his "troubling" arrest of a Radio Free Europe reporter covering the guerrilla war in Chechnya in 1999, Solnick nevertheless concluded that the new president would find it hard to implement any truly repressive policy.

Stephens Holmes of New York University's law school, in a widely reprinted essay titled "Simulations of Power in Putin's Russia," was even more dismissive of the Russian leader's KGB past and authoritarian tendencies. Arguing against what he dubbed the School of Fear, Holmes expressed con-



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fidence that, Putin or no Putin, the Kremlin was simply incapable "of imposing authoritarian discipline on Russian society."

In fact, however, the regime was already beginning to move aggressively in just that direction. Although Friedman would later try to connect this development with the latitude afforded Putin by the rise in oil revenues—"as the price of oil goes up," Friedman would write, "the pace of freedom goes down"—Putin's first crackdown on the independent Russian media went back to New Year's Eve 1999, predating his assumption of the presidency and at a time when oil still averaged $17.00 a barrel. Then, in June 2000, came the arrest on trumped-up charges of Vladimir Gusinsky, the head of the television network NTV. In November of the same year, Boris Berezovsky, another oligarch and the owner of the independent TV station ORT, fled to exile in London, lamenting that "all the decrees, all the laws proposed by Putin are directed at again enslaving people."

At the time, it was widely believed that Berezovsky, hardly a model citizen, was just another among the many disgruntled oligarchs—Yeltsin-era monopolists who had enriched themselves by taking over former state industries at bargain-basement prices and whom Putin was trying to bring to heel. But this was simplistic. Putin was not at odds with the oligarchs; they had been and remained indispensable to him. But he was bent on intimidating them into doing his bidding, or else replacing them with creatures who would. In Sackwa's euphemistic phrasing, Putin wanted to open "a new phase in which the [Russian] administration sought to shape the economic sphere by sponsoring 'national champions'": i.e., those willing to play ball. The analyst Lilia Shevtsova of the Carnegie Endowment was more direct about it. "Instead of using the courts" to deal with those who might have broken the law, she observed, Putin was relying on "strong-arm tactics led by the MVD [Ministry of Internal Affairs], the FSB [the successor to the KGB], and the prosecutor general."

The process of liquidating recalcitrant oligarchs reached a high point in October 2003 when Mikhail Khodorkovsky, head of the mammoth oil company Yukos and Russia's wealthiest man, was summarily thrown into prison—a crowning signal that Russia's economy, like its media, would no longer enjoy an independent existence. Although the old arrangement of behind-the-scenes kickbacks and profiteering remained in place, the leading oligarchs were now Putin men, many of them former KGB and security-services people like himself. "As in Soviet days," Sackwa writes gingerly, "law was used instrumentally."

STILL, TO many Western observers, Putin's authoritarianism, distasteful as it undeniably was, seemed a not intolerable price to be paid for Russia's emergence as a stable society, one with which, in the phrase of the day, the West "could do business." Moreover, it was possible to point to an important gauge of Putin's success—namely, his popularity at home. Opinion poll after opinion poll showed that Russians not only endorsed his style of governance—a 2002 survey suggested 57-percent approval of press censorship—but, in sharp contrast with the mood of the Yeltsin years, felt a growing sense of "optimism about the future."

No wonder, then, that Putin would win reelection in March 2004 with 71.2 percent of the vote (although two out of every three Russians had stayed away from the polls or voted against him). The speech that launched his reelection bid—"I am certain that only a developed civil society can ensure the stability of democratic freedom and the guarantees of human and civil rights"—pushed every sensitive Western button. Could it be that a new era was dawning after all? No one wanted to inquire too closely into what Putin meant by a "developed civil society," or how he intended to get there.

For Fareed Zakaria that year, Putin was a leading example of "illiberal democracy"—i.e., a system run by a genuinely popular authoritarian. True, Zakaria admitted in *The Future of Freedom* (2004), "there will be absolutely no one left to check the Kremlin" if Putin were to continue along the way he was going. But at least he "want[ed] to build a modern Russia," and if this succeeded, the country might yet "become a normal industrialized country with some of the liberal features" of a genuine democracy. "Perhaps," Zakaria added hopefully, "he even believes that eventually Russia will be able to democratize its political system." Only not yet.

James Billington, the distinguished Russian expert and former Librarian of Congress, was compelled to agree. Like others, Billington had plenty of doubts about Putin: the parliamentary elections in December 2003, he wrote, marked "a clear victory for the authoritarian-nationalist over the liberal-democratic impulses in the new Russia." Still, that was Russia for you—a country that "would find its true identity," in Billington's judgment, "only by reasserting top-down central authority—what Russians called the 'power vertical'—against the democratic trends that had been developing from the bottom up."



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Strobe Talbott, who had been the principal architect of Russia policy in Bill Clinton's State Department, took a similar view in a *New York Times* op-ed piece on May 12, 2004. Talbott quoted with approval from Putin's oath of office for his second presidential term: "only a free people in a free country can be genuinely successful." Yes, he conceded, the regime was increasingly repressive. Yes, having largely snuffed out the opposition, Putin was under no real internal pressure to liberalize. But again it was those stubborn Russians—a people who "want to modernize their country, but [who] are determined to do it in their own way, not according to some Western formula or by Western standards."

About one thing, observers like Zakaria, Billington, and Talbott were right: alternatives to Putin were few on the ground. There was a lonely figure like Garry Kasparov, the chess champion and democratic dissident whom Billington thought something of a nut. There was also a resurgent Communist party, which was threatening explicitly to turn back the clock to Soviet days. Even more menacingly, there were crude Nazi-style nationalists like Boris Zhirinovsky, whose party had doubled its seats in the 2003 parliamentary election. And there was the Rodina party, a Slavophile grouping advocating a sharp break with the West and the re-nationalization of the entire Russian economy. Putin may not have been an ideal leader for Russia by Western standards; but under the circumstances, he seemed a fairly balanced choice.

Yet as Billington himself was aware when he wrote *Russia in Search of Itself* (2004), the Rodina party was itself an artificial creation, its radical populist message having been concocted by Putin himself in order to split the vote on the Communist Left. Thanks to the help of such decoys, and to the elimination of any truly democratic opposition, Russian parliamentary politics was becoming a masquerade, behind which Putin's dictatorship continued to consolidate itself.

Sounding his own hopeful note, Talbott ventured that perhaps a drop in oil prices, in tandem with "the logic of what Russians call 'life itself,'" might finally force Putin to resolve the contradiction between his democratic-seeming rhetoric and his authoritarian politics. In fact, however, oil prices were about to rise steeply, from $34.00 to $61.00 a barrel by 2006, and Putin was already learning that, whatever Western leaders might say in criticism of his harsh practices, there was little they would do. To the contrary: the more he seemed to pursue a hardline policy at home, the readier the United States and Europe appeared to embrace him.

BACK IN September 1999, when Putin was barely a month into his first term as prime minister under Boris Yeltsin, apartment blocks in the cities of Moscow, Buinaksk, and Volgodonsk were rocked by a series of bomb explosions. Three-hundred people were killed. Putin immediately blamed the attacks on separatists from the breakaway region of Chechnya in the North Caucasus and promised swift action against the "terrorists."

By that point, public opinion had largely turned against the on-again off-again war that had been going on in Chechnya since 1994. In the words of Peter Truscott in *Putin's Progress* (2004), people "couldn't believe Russia would re-fight the first Chechen war, with the huge human and financial cost that would involve." But that was exactly what Putin vowed to do—with the coming presidential election as his backdrop. A figure almost unknown to the Russian public until then, he was suddenly a person of high profile. To this day, theories linger that the FSB set the bombs in order to focus Russian public opinion on the Chechen issue, and on Putin as the nation's savior.

More than 80,000 Russian troops poured into Chechnya in a full-scale invasion. Future historians may well see the assault on that province as the blackest of the black marks against Putin, and the West's relative silence as one of its greatest moral failures. As documented by a handful of intrepid Russian journalists like the soon-to-be-assassinated Anna Politkovskaya, torture, beatings, massacres, and looting by drunken and out-of-control Russian soldiers were commonplace.* By official count, 4,200 Russian soldiers were dead by 2002, though soldier's rights groups and human-rights activists said the true figure was three or four times higher; at least 100,000 Chechens would eventually die in the conflict.

When public confidence in the war flagged again in 2002, a new series of domestic attacks reignited national hysteria. In October of that year, a terrorist managed to seize a theater in Moscow and hold 800 hostages. Then came the massacre at a school in Beslan in 2004. Each time, Putin gained new executive powers to step up the war effort in Chechnya. And he did eventually succeed in breaking the back of Chechen resistance—by, to borrow the phrase of the Roman historian Tacitus, making a desert and calling it peace.

Apart from some human-rights groups, the West remained largely silent about what, if carried out by the United States or a European country, would

* *A Small Corner of Hell: Dispatches from Chechnya* (2003).



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certainly have been branded as ethnic cleansing. Instead, the EU and the U.S. largely accepted Putin's explanation that the Chechen separatists were really Islamic extremists, and that the war was Russia's corner of the ongoing struggle against Islamist terrorism. Answering his critics in the West, Putin employed much the same vocabulary that he invokes today against critics of his actions in Georgia: what business does the U.S., a country that invaded Iraq, have questioning how Russia chooses to deal with its own internal threats?

Another card Putin was able to play to win Western acquiescence was his supposed cooperation in the war on terror. In this connection it is useful to recall that the Soviet Union had been a leading *sponsor* of international terrorism during the 1970's and the heyday of the PLO. The prospect of Russia's now working as an active partner in combating Islamic terrorism must have seemed irresistible to European and American statesmen and intelligence services. But a prospect is what it largely remained.

In reality, Russia's role when it came to rogue nations like Saddam Hussein's Iraq and later Ahmadinejad's Iran was the exact opposite of what Putin sought to portray. Next to France's Jacques Chirac, he was Saddam's most reliable ally in the months leading up to Operation Iraqi Freedom. In the Security Council, Moscow consistently blocked Washington's push for international action, finally forcing the Bush administration to move without an explicit vote of UN approval. In the light of later disclosures about the UN's corrupt Oil-for-Food program, it is easy to appreciate what was behind this: fully 30 percent of the recipients on Saddam's list of payoffs were Russian. To this day, Putin continues to oppose U.S. policy in Iraq, just as he resolutely opposes any firm action against Iran (one reason, incidentally, that he has remained popular with some on the European Left).

BY THE time his second presidential term started in 2004, Putin's attacks on domestic opponents were turning ever more blatant and deadly. In April 2003, the parliamentary deputy Sergei Yushenkov, a leading liberal, was shot dead outside his Moscow apartment; the murderer was never found. In July, another deputy, Yury Shchekochikhin, died mysteriously of what seemed to be poisoning. Viktor Yushchenko, a Ukrainian presidential candidate who publicly advocated stronger ties to the West, came down with a similarly mysterious illness, but eventually recovered.

Not so fortunate was Alexander Litvinenko, a former FSB officer and outspoken critic of Putin. His slow and agonizing death in London in November 2006 was the result of contamination by a chemical, polonium-210, well-known to Russian intelligence agents. This was almost certainly a case of murder, as was the killing a month earlier of the journalist Anna Politkovskaya. Her death, like Litvinenko's, went officially unsolved.

Each of these occurrences duly elicited cries of outrage in the West, but little else. The general response seemed to be: tread cautiously, things could always be worse. When, in 2005, some made bold to call for Russia's exclusion from the G-8 summit, Strobe Talbott warned heatedly that any such strategy would backfire. Turning our backs on Putin, he wrote, would be "a sign that the West is giving up on Russia" itself, and would further dishearten Russian democrats. Instead, the way to proceed was by means of "quiet calibrated democracy," which might yet induce Putin "to reaffirm principles of good governance" and thus provide a way "to nudge Russia in the right direction."

Talbott's argument, like that of many others, rested on a simple proposition: for all his iron-fisted rule, Putin was creating the necessary preconditions to the country's "evolution as an open society" by restoring national confidence and rebuilding the Russian economy. But was that true in 2005, and is it true today? A powerful recent article in *Foreign Affairs* by the Russian experts Michael McFaul and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss casts severe doubt on the claim.

Although the Russian economy did expand by 69 percent between 1999 and 2007, eleven of the fifteen former USSR republics did better, and only one, Kyrgyzstan, did worse. (Former Soviet-bloc countries like the Czech Republic and Poland did *far* better.) The driving engine of Russian growth, moreover, was not real economic output but oil and gas exports. It was somewhat like the case of Saudi Arabia: take away the petrodollars ($350 billion in 2007), and Putin's Russia emerges as another Third World country.

Nor is it the case that Putin's rule has created a more stable business climate, for Russians or anyone else. In 2006 the World Bank ranked Russia at 96th out of 175 nations for favorable investment opportunities—the country's worst-ever showing. Putin's steady threats to cut off oil and gas to his neighbors has led to a mass exodus of foreign investors. According to the economist Judy Shelton, who correctly predicted the economic collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, Putin "has yet to learn that capital does not respond well to extortion."

What is true of business is true in other areas as



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well. Globally, in terms of rule of law, Russia ranks in the bottom fifth of nations (again according to the World Bank). In terms of overall governance, it ranks in the 38th percentile from the bottom. In the words of the British analyst Martin Wolf, Putin's huge expansion of state power has resulted not "in an effective state, but [in] an overweening one."

By the beginning of 2008, in any case, the idea that the West could continue to "do business" with Putin was seeming increasingly illusory. This left only one further justification for putting up with him: that his regime, however brutal and corrupt, at least did not threaten the stability of post-cold-war Europe. As Stephen Kotkin of Princeton assured an audience in February 2007, Russia's foreign outlook was neither assertive nor resentful, and the country "is really only threatening to itself."

Unfortunately, Kotkin spoke just before Putin threatened to cut oil and gas supplies to nations like Poland, and just before Russia launched an attempt to disrupt Internet service in the Baltic republics. But wishful thinking dies hard. This past February, responding to Martin Wolf's dire portrait of Putin's Russia in the *Financial Times*, the economist Vlad Sobell wrote: "I strongly disagree . . . that Putin is a 'dangerous failure.'" On the contrary, "what is dangerous is the poisonous, but unfortunately now well-embedded notion that the 'increasingly aggressive' Russia is about to menace us."

Six months later, Russian tanks rolled into Georgia.

How do we explain this long-running inclination (to put it no more strongly) on the part of knowledgeable observers to avert their eyes from the challenge posed by Putin and his regime?*

Part of the answer, certainly, lies in Putin's skill at talking the democratic talk while walking the authoritarian walk. As an exercise in deceptive rhetoric, his two terms as Russian president were stunningly successful in conveying the impression that at some point he would deem it possible, for the future good of Russia, to relax his iron grip. And it was not just Westerners who chose to believe him or to rationalize his repressive actions. "The model for Russia in the early 90's was Poland," the Russian liberal Vladimir Ryzkhov told Fareed Zakaria in 1999; "now it's Chile under Pinochet." Ryzkhov, like Zakaria, thought Putin might turn out to be the Russian Pinochet, "a good czar."

But was there ever any good reason to assume that a man whose every instinct seemed geared *away* from the values of a free society would willingly lead the way to such a society? In fact, the real issue may not have been excessive trust in Putin himself—which almost no one was guilty of—but an excess of distrust in the ability of the Russian people to make the transition to democracy. The possibility that Russia might have within it the moral, intellectual, and cultural resources to become a free, open, and stable democracy on its own, without the stern guiding hand of an authoritarian leader, has seemed, to many, wildly unrealistic.

Some have traced this supposed national resistance to Western democratic values to the country's history and anti-liberal legacy under czars and Soviets. The same explanation serves, paradoxically, to explain Putin's popularity. Why do Russians vote in large numbers? Not because they have a desire for Western-style democracy, but because what they really want is something that Putin supplies in abundance: at best, a kind of plebiscitary democracy, or what Zakaria calls illiberal democracy. In today's Russia, elections provide, in that writer's words, "a cover for authoritarianism and populism."

And is the authoritarian version of democracy such a bad thing? Not in the view of observers like Zakaria. After all, they point out, Western-style liberal democracy is a messy and unpredictable affair, all the more so when imported wholesale into an underdeveloped or emerging nation—or one, like Russia, with an already long history of authoritarian rule. In such cases, liberal democracy becomes a vehicle for rampant corruption, for ethnic strife (as in India), for chaos (as in Russia under Yeltsin), or for the rise of "impetuous nationalists" like Georgian president Saakashvili. By contrast, the Putin model provides a single clear figure with whom we can deal, and on whom we can count.

This may be why, as Natan Sharansky has noted, "democratic governments across the globe, on the Left and the Right, almost always prefer the nondemocratic regime they know to the democratic one they don't." But the fallacies underlying this line of thinking are many. In Russia's case, one such fallacy is the belief that the problems of the Yeltsin era sprang from an excess of democracy—more democracy than Russians could handle. Actually, the problem was too few safeguards for democracy, especially in the form of institutions enforcing the rule of law and, specifically, the sanctity of con-

* An important exception is Leon Aron of the American Enterprise Institute, author of a fine biography of Boris Yeltsin. The progression of Aron's change of view about Putin, from cautiously positive to grimly negative, can be traced in the pages of COMMENTARY from November 2002 ("Russia's Revolution") to October 2004 ("Is Russia Going Backward?") to December 2006 ("What Does Putin Want?").



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tracts. It was precisely the lack of such institutional safeguards that enabled the rise first of the oligarchs and then of Putin himself.

Another fallacy lies in the notion that only certain societies are capable of achieving democratic breakthroughs. Aside from today's Iraq, a striking counterexample is Georgia itself. For 70 years, from 1921 to 1991, all traces of an independent civil society in that land were stamped out by Soviet occupation. During the first half-decade after the collapse of the USSR, Georgia endured an economic meltdown and virtual civil war with its Abkhaz and Ossetian populations, laboring all the while under a Mafia-style regime as corrupt and narrow as that of any former Soviet republic.

Then, in November 2003, a band of reformers, including Mikheil Saakashvili, launched the so-called Rose Revolution, which kicked out the old regime and instituted a new direction. Observers like Thomas Friedman like to point out that Georgian democracy is hardly perfect. They are right. But it has been evolving steadily and self-consciously in a Western direction, and has sought to be included as part of the Western world through membership in NATO.

This is the self-same liberal-democratic government that many in Europe and elsewhere are evidently willing to see dismembered in order to avoid a confrontation with the illiberal government of Vladimir Putin. And herein lies the final fallacy—namely, that governments headed by a single leader who makes all the decisions are in fact easier to deal with, and by their nature easier to incorporate into a stable international order, than ones characterized by what Talbott refers to as "free-for-all democracy." On just these grounds, Henry Kissinger points out in *Diplomacy*, some British statesmen welcomed Hitler's advent to power in 1933. "[Hitler's] signature would bind all Germany like no other German's in all her past," enthused British ambassador Eric Phipps to his colleagues in London. Five years later at Munich, Britain and France had the opportunity to test the validity of that bond. The lesson was a bitter one.

This time around, we have a chance to learn the same lesson once again—so far, without the high stakes that were involved in the 1930's. Georgia in 2008 is not Czechoslovakia in 1938. Nor are we returning to the cold war. But the final lesson from the rule of Putin should be clear. When we back stability over democracy, we get neither. When we choose democracy over stability, we have an opportunity to build a foundation for both. That is now happening in Iraq, and until the Russian invasion it was happening even more unmistakably in Georgia. Our task for now is to make sure we don't make the same bad choice again. Standing up to Putin, calling him by his proper name, would be a start.



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# Obama's Leftism

*Joshua Muravchik*

INTRODUCING HIMSELF to the nation at the 2004 Democratic national convention, Barack Obama spoke not only of his black father, "born and raised in a small village in Kenya," but of his white mother, "born in a town . . . in Kansas" to a father who "worked on oil rigs and farms through most of the Depression" before enlisting in military service "the day after Pearl Harbor." What brought them together was "a magical place, America," he said, adding, "I stand here today, grateful for the diversity of my heritage . . . knowing that . . . in no other country on earth, is my story even possible."

Not only was Obama the real, living embodiment of America's racial diversity. He was a dazzling presence, outshining the party's nominee with his look, stage presence, oratorical mastery, and the brilliance of his rhetoric. Nor was that all. This avatar of reconciliation talked of transcending divisions not just racial but political and ideological. He spoke lovingly of country and movingly of God and family in a way that had eluded the Democrats since their sharp turn to the Left when the party nominated George McGovern in 1972.

In the speech's highlight, Obama said:

> [T]here is not a liberal America and a conservative America—there is the United States of America. . . . We worship an "awesome God" in the blue states, and we don't like federal agents poking around in our libraries in the red states. We coach Little League in the blue states and yes, we've got some gay friends in the red states. There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq and there are patriots who supported the war in Iraq. We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America.

Four years later, Obama is the Democratic nominee, and even his occasional shrill attacks on his opponent seem to have chipped away little of the cornerstone of his own candidacy: the promise to bring us, all of us, together. Can he do that? Is he well-suited to raise the curtain on a new post-partisan, post-ideological era?

From his record in office, it would hardly seem so. Non-partisanship does not just mean Democrats coaching Little League, lovely as that is, but cooperating with members of the other party in developing compromise solutions to national problems. The Senate has a particularly rich tradition of such bipartisanship, but Obama appears never to have participated in it. On the contrary: according to *Congressional Quarterly*, which measures how often each member votes in accordance with or at variance from the majority of his own party, Obama has compiled one of the most partisan of all voting records.

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Last year, for example, the average Senator voted with his own party 84 percent of the time; Obama voted with his party 96 percent of the time. In the prior two years, his number was 95 percent, making him the fourth most partisan member of the Senate. And not just partisan, but also highly ideological. In 2007, according to the *National Journal*, Obama's voting record made him "the most liberal Senator." Throughout his Senate career, according to Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), the dean of liberal advocacy groups, Obama voted "right" 90 percent of the time. Actually this is misleading, since ADA counts an absence as if it were a vote on the "wrong" side. If we discount his absences, Obama voted to ADA's approval more than 98 percent of the time.

This touches directly on the question of what, beyond the platitudes of unity, hope, and change, Obama himself believes in. His voting record is one indication. Another is his intellectual evolution.

Abandoned by his father when he was still too young to remember him and then sent at age ten by his mother to live in Hawaii with her parents, who enrolled him in a prestigious prep school, Obama spent much of his teen years searching for his black identity. Late in his high-school career he found a mentor of sorts in Frank Marshall Davis, an older black poet. According to Herbert Romerstein, former minority chief investigator of the House Committee on Internal Security, FBI files reveal Davis to have been a member of the Communist party not only in its public phase but also when it officially dissolved and went underground in the 1950's.

According to Obama, Davis told him that a white person "can't know" a black person, and that the "real price of admission" to college was "leaving your race at the door." Perhaps influenced by this, he reports that at college,

> [t]o avoid being mistaken for a sellout, I chose my friends carefully. The more politically active black students. The foreign students. The Chicanos. The Marxist professors and structural feminists and punk-rock performance poets.

Despite Obama's tone of self-mockery, the passage discloses the milieu in which he immersed himself. In this light, it is not surprising that, upon graduation, he decided on a career as a "community organizer," even if it was none too clear to him what exactly that meant. As he confesses in his early memoir *Dreams from My Father* (1995):

> When classmates . . . asked me just what it was that a community organizer did, I couldn't answer them directly. Instead I'd pronounce on the need for change. Change in the White House . . . . Change in the Congress . . . . Change in the mood of the country . . . . Change won't come from the top, I would say. Change will come from a mobilized grass roots. . . . I'll organize black folks.

Thanks to a grant from a left-wing foundation, he was hired by a small group of white protégés of Saul Alinsky, the original apostle of "community organizing." Alinsky's institutional base was the Industrial Areas Foundation, which he called a "school for professional radicals" and whose goal he announced to be "revolution, not revelation." As Obama himself would put it, there were "two roles that an organizer was supposed to play . . . getting the Stop sign [and] the educative function. At some point you have to link up winning that Stop sign . . . with the larger trends, larger movements." In other words, "community organizer," to Obama and his colleagues and mentors, was a euphemism for professional radical.

It was in the course of trying to mobilize churches for political protest that Obama met Jeremiah Wright. When the controversy surrounding the pastor arose this year, Obama denied being present when Rev. Wright delivered his most incendiary sermons, commenting that he was like "an old uncle who sometimes will say things that I don't agree with." But this was evasive. By Obama's own testimony, the reason other ministers directed him to Wright was that Wright's Trinity United Church of Christ was steeped in politics.

Thus, Obama writes that Wright had "dabbl[ed] with liquor, Islam, and black nationalism" before returning to Christianity and studying, among other things, "the black liberation theologians." Whoever and however many these theologians may have been, Wright invoked only one on the church's website. "The vision statement of Trinity United Church of Christ," in Wright's words, was "based upon the systematized liberation theology that started in 1969 with the publication of Dr. James Cone's book, *Black Power and Black Theology*."

What was that theology? Here are two tiny snippets of Cone's thought: "Christianity and whiteness are opposites," and "there will be no peace in America until whites begin to hate their whiteness."* In ad-

* For more on this, see David Freddoso, *The Case Against Barack Obama* (Regnery).



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dition to a cross superimposed on a map of Africa, the website declares: "We are an African people, and remain 'true to our native land,' the mother continent, the cradle of civilization." It defines Trinity as, among other things, "a congregation committed to the historical education of African people in diaspora, a congregation committed to liberation." When Obama joined the church in the 1980's, it did not yet have a website, but he tells of a brochure that, while condoning the pursuit of income, warned congregants against the "psychological entrapment of black 'middleclassness.'" The liberationist music was playing back then, too.

At Trinity, Obama attempted to enlist Rev. Wright in his protest campaign, and the pastor sought to recruit Obama to the church. Evidently both succeeded, though at the time Obama says he was so far from religion that he "could no longer distinguish between faith and mere folly." But when he began to participate in Trinity's services he discovered he was not unique in his ambivalence. Of the other congregants, he would observe:

> Not all of what these people sought was strictly religious. . . . It occurred to me that Trinity, with its African themes, its emphasis on black history, [was] a redistributor of values and circulator of ideas. Only now the redistribution didn't run in just a single direction from the schoolteacher or the physician . . . to . . . the sharecropper or the young man fresh from the South. . . . The flow of culture now ran in reverse as well, the former gang-banger, the teenage mother, had their own forms of validation—claims of greater deprivation, and hence authenticity.

The first time Obama attended services at Trinity, Wright delivered a sermon (it was titled "the audacity of hope") whose theme was: "white folks' greed runs a world in need." Twenty years later, when it was revealed that Wright's church had honored Louis Farrakhan, that Wright had traveled with Farrakhan to visit the Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi, and that in his sermons Wright had beseeched God to "damn America," charged the U.S. government with inventing the AIDS virus in order to kill black people, and claimed that Israel and South Africa had colluded to invent an "ethnic bomb" to kill blacks and Arabs while leaving whites unharmed—when all this was revealed, Obama, under pressure from the Hillary Clinton campaign, declared himself "shocked" at Wright's vitriol. But in truth not only was he aware of Wright's views, they were what had drawn him to Trinity church in the first place.

OBAMA LEFT Chicago after three years to attend Harvard Law School. As he would explain, "I had things to learn . . . , things that would help me bring about real change." After graduating with honors in 1991, he returned to the Windy City to join the small law firm of Judson Miner, an activist who had been attorney to Mayor Harold Washington.

Within three years of his return, he also became deeply involved with Bill Ayers, a former leader of the so-called Weather Underground. This leftist terrorist group, akin to the German Baader-Meinhof gang or the Italian Red Brigades, specialized in bombing government buildings. Ayers later wrote boastfully that he had personally carried out an attack on the Pentagon. Ayers's wife and closest collaborator was Bernardine Dohrn, whose views were so extreme that they seemed to cross a line from ultra-leftism to Satanism. At a meeting of the Weather Underground, she hailed the murders then recently committed by Charles Manson's demented followers. "Dig it, first they killed those pigs, then they ate dinner in the same room with them, they even shoved a fork into a victim's stomach!" she exulted, giving a three-fingered salute to signify a fork.

After the pair emerged from hiding in 1980, a court dismissed the main charges against Ayers on the grounds that the government had used an illegal wiretap. He pled guilty to possessing explosives, but served no time. The net outcome inspired him to gloat that he was "guilty as hell and free as a bird." Dohrn served seven months. Then they both went respectable, but without changing their views. Ayers posed for a picture stomping on an American flag, and in 2001 he told the *New York Times*: "I don't regret setting bombs. I feel we didn't do enough."

The details of Obama's association with Ayers remain somewhat shrouded because both Ayers and Dohrn have refused to discuss it, while Obama and his spokesmen have prevaricated about it. When, during one of the televised primary debates, George Stephanopoulos asked about his connection to Ayers, Obama replied:

> This is a guy who lives in my neighborhood, who's a professor of English in Chicago who I know and who I have not received some official endorsement from. He's not somebody who I exchange ideas from on a regular basis. And the notion that somehow as a consequence of me knowing somebody who engaged in detestable acts 40 years ago, when I was eight years old, somehow reflects on me and my values doesn't make much sense.



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Later, Obama's campaign manager, David Axelrod, added: "Bill Ayers lives in his neighborhood. Their kids attend the same school." If this is true, Ayers's children must be slow learners, since they are thirty-one and twenty-eight while Obama's are nine and six. But Obama's own reply, though less bald-faced than Axelrod's, was thoroughly disingenuous. Thanks to the meticulous investigations of the Left-leaning blogger Steven Diamond (global-labor.blogspot.com), the story of Obama and Ayers's collaboration has been seeping into the public record despite extraordinary efforts to seal it.

After escaping punishment for his crimes, Ayers received degrees in education and became an advocate of school reform in Chicago. In particular, he propounded a "radical" project in the late 1980's that was inspired by New York City's disastrous experiment decades earlier in "community control." Ayers's project was championed by a coalition called the Alliance for Better Chicago Schools (ABC's); according to Diamond, one member of the "alliance" was the Developing Communities Project (DCP), the group for which Obama worked as an organizer. If so, then it is likely that the two met back then, since the DCP was a tiny organization and Obama was most likely its representative.

In any event, in 1994, when the philanthropist Walter Annenberg put up $500 million to help the nation's public schools, Ayers submitted a grant proposal that secured $50 million for an entity called the Chicago Annenberg Challenge. The word "challenge" signified that the recipients were required to find double the amount in matching funds; this they did, disposing altogether of some $160 million.

The ostensible purpose of the project was to reinvigorate Chicago's flagging decentralization project. Ayers devised a structure made up of three connected elements, of which the main two were the Collaborative, or operational center, and the Board, with overall financial control. Ayers named himself to head the Collaborative; Barack Obama, apparently by Ayers's choice, became chairman of the Board.

So it is conceivable that the two met as late as 1994, but this hardly seems likely. Would anyone yield control of the purse to someone he did not already know well and trust thoroughly? And what exactly were Obama's credentials in the field of school reform, unless he had been active in the ABC's with Ayers in the 1980's? At the very latest, the two must have met sometime after Obama returned from Harvard in late 1991 or early 1992, well before he was chosen to chair the board in 1995.

For the next four to five years, the two worked together to raise the matching funds and disburse small grants to local organizations pushing the reform program. It could only have been an intimate partnership. When Obama decided to run for the state senate, his first fund-raising event was held in the home of Ayers and Dohrn. In 1997, Ayers published a book about juvenile justice, *A Kind and Just Parent*, which Obama blurbed as "a searing and timely account." The two also served together on the board of the leftist Woods Fund from 1998 until 2001.

This is what is now public about the relations between Obama and the unrepentant terrorist Bill Ayers. There may be much more, so far successfully hidden by all concerned; but even these facts suggest that Ayers was among Obama's closest collaborators.

Obama's turn to electoral politics signified no change in his basic ideological orientation. As his wife Michelle put it: "Barack is not a politician first and foremost. He's a community activist exploring the viability of politics to make change." ("I take that observation as a compliment," Obama said as late as 2005.)

Obama's target was a legislative seat held by Alice Palmer, who had decided to make a run for the U.S. Congress. She introduced Obama in Democratic-party circles as her anointed successor. (After a later falling-out, the two would dispute whether her support had amounted to a formal endorsement or merely, as she claimed, "an informal nod.") Like others among his mentors or patrons, Palmer, too, was a radical, a member of the executive body of the U.S. Peace Council, the least disguised of Soviet front organizations. She had made multiple pilgrimages to the Soviet Union, and in 1986 attended the 27th Congress of the Soviet Communist party, telling the party paper on her return that the Soviets "plan to provide people with higher wages and better education, health and transportation, while we in our country are hearing that cutbacks are necessary in all of these areas." According to a later story in the same paper, Palmer visited Moscow again the following year to attend the World Congress of Women sponsored by another Soviet front organization.

In his campaign for the Illinois senate, Obama was endorsed by the New Party (NP), a coalition of socialists, Communists, and other leftists. According to the newsletter of the local chapter of Democratic Socialists of America, whose members were said to constitute 15 percent of the Chicago



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New Party, "Once approved, candidates must sign a contract with the NP [which] mandates that they must have a visible and active relationship with the NP." Apparently, Obama signed such a pledge. After winning the primary (unopposed because his lawyers had succeeded in knocking all three opponents off the ballot), he appeared at a New Party membership meeting to voice his thanks.

Entering the national political scene eight years later, Obama did not, to be sure, appear as a radical, but he still bore the earmarks of the world in which he had been immersed for twenty years. He called himself "progressive," a term of art favored by veterans of the hard New Left, like Tom Hayden, as well as by old-time Communists. Early this year his wife Michelle, lacking his tact, would kindle controversy by saying that his success in the presidential primaries made her feel proud of her country for the first time. The comment, a faux pas that she was soon at pains to explain away, flowed logically from her view, expressed in her standard stump speech, that our country is a "downright mean" place, "guided by fear," where the "life . . . that most people are living has gotten progressively worse."

This year, Obama appeared before Rev. Al Sharpton's National Action Network (whose official slogan is "no justice, no peace") to seek its support. The candidate praised Sharpton as "a voice for the voiceless and . . . dispossessed. What National Action Network has done is so important to change America, and it must be changed from the bottom up." Given Sharpton's long career of reckless racial demagogy, it might seem shocking that a mainstream candidate should be seeking his blessing, but in this, at least, Obama was not unique: all of the 2008 Democratic aspirants did so. He did, though, strive to separate himself from the pack:

> If there is somebody who has been more on the forefront on behalf of the issues that you care about and has more concrete accomplishment on behalf of the things you're concerned about, then I am happy to see you endorse them. I am happy to see you support them. . . . But I am absolutely confident that you will not find that, because there is nobody who has stood fast on these issues more consistently each and every day, than I have. That is something that I know.

As it happened, Sharpton, a consummate wheeler-dealer, kept his options open for a while. But other radicals, soft and hard, rushed to embrace Obama, often waxing rapturous in their support. Robert Borosage and Katrina vanden Heuvel enthused in the *Nation* that Obama's was "a historic candidacy," from which "new possibilities will be born." Michael Lerner wrote in *Tikkun* that the "energy, hopefulness, and excitement that manifests [sic] in Obama's campaign" was reminiscent of "the civil-rights movement, the anti-war movement, the women's movement, the environmental movement, and the movement for gay liberation." Most remarkably, Tom Hayden himself joined the chorus by breaking a New Left taboo against "red-baiting" and laying bare some of Hillary Clinton's own far-Left history—this, in retaliation for the Clinton campaign's revelations about Obama's radical background.

EVEN AFTER declaring his candidacy, and despite a certain inevitable sidling rightward, Obama still reflected the presuppositions of a radical worldview. In one notable remark, he said of voters in economic distress that in their desperation they "cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them." Chastised for his condescension, he responded: "I said something that everybody knows is true." This was elitism of a very specific kind—the mentality of the community organizer, according to which people in the grip of "false consciousness" need to be enlightened as to the true nature of their class interests, and to the nature of their true class enemies.

The same suppositions are again evident in Obama's stances on international issues. Iraq, as he sees it, is only a symptom. "I don't want to just end the war . . . I want to end the mindset that got us into war in the first place." And what would that mindset be? In a 2002 speech that he frequently cites, he said the war resulted from

> the cynical attempt by Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz and other armchair, weekend warriors . . . to shove their own ideological agendas down our throats, irrespective of the costs in lives lost and in hardships borne . . . the attempt by political hacks like Karl Rove to distract us from a rise in the uninsured, a rise in the poverty rate, a drop in the median income . . . the arms merchants in our own country . . . feeding the countless wars that rage across the globe.

In this litany of global perfidy, the issues of Saddam Hussein's murderous dictatorship, of American security, of the future of freedom, shrink to inconsequentiality next to the struggle of the oppressed against their American capitalist overlords.



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When it comes to Iran, Obama has acknowledged that the regime presents a problem. But his actions—he opposed the Kyl-Lieberman amendment designating the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps a terrorist organization—as well as his rhetoric imply that the greater danger emanates from George W. Bush (who is allegedly seeking "any justification to extend the Iraq war or to attack Iran"). Likewise on defeating terrorism, where he rejects the America-centric focus that Bush has given to the issue; instead, in the words of his aides, Obama's main goal is to "restore . . . our moral standing"—that is, to put an end to *our* aggressive ways.

Even the events of 9/11 could not shake Obama from the mindset that the enemy is always ourselves. The bombings, he wrote, reflected

> the underlying struggle—between worlds of plenty and worlds of want; between the modern and the ancient; between those who embrace our teeming, colliding, irksome diversity, while still insisting on a set of values that binds us together; and those who would seek, under whatever flag or slogan or sacred text, a certainty and simplification that justifies cruelty toward those not like us.

In this reading, the lessons to be learned from the actions of Osama bin Laden and Mohammed Atta are that we must accept multiculturalism at home and share our wealth abroad.

In sum, Obama comes to us from a background farther to the Left than any presidential nominee since George McGovern, or perhaps ever. This makes him an extremely unlikely leader to bridge the divides of party, ideology, or, for that matter, race. If he loses, it will be for that reason (though many will no doubt adduce different explanations, including of course white racism, to which every GOP victory since Nixon's election in 1968 has been attributed).

And if he wins? Without a doubt, it will be a thrilling moment. But the enduring importance of that landmark event will depend on the subsequent effectiveness of his presidency. If his tenure—like that of, say, Richard Nixon or Jimmy Carter—should end by inviting scorn, then it may open as many wounds as it heals. On the other hand, it is not unimaginable that he may rise to the challenge of the office and govern from the center, as he will have to do to succeed. This, however, would truly involve reinventing himself, a task for which his intellectual and ideological background furnishes few materials.

With his sharply partisan speech to the Democratic national convention in late August, Obama appeared to zag to the Left after months of zigging toward the center in hopes of winning over independent voters, which had stirred cries of alarm among some of his leftist supporters. Others among them, however, were and are nothing fazed. As the *Nation*'s Robert Dreyfuss explained, they "put their faith in the Senator's character and innate instincts." Heaven help us, they are probably right.



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# Honor versus Unity

*Laurence D. Cooper*

THIS SHOULD have been the year of the wonk. With a credit crunch, rising inflation, falling home prices, and a growing sense of menace arising from the behavior of the Russians in the Caucasus and the mullahs in Iran, one might have expected the presidential campaign of 2008, even more than previous contests, to focus on policy prescriptions. At a time when four-fifths of Americans say the country is on the wrong track, logic suggests voters would want to know specifically what programs the presidential candidates intend to put into place when they take office, and how those programs differ.

Yet by placing John McCain and Barack Obama atop the Republican and Democratic lines on Election Day, primary voters have presented general-election voters with a contest that is very nearly the opposite. These are two unusually personal candidacies whose animating texts are not policy compendia but uncommonly interesting best-selling autobiographies with strangely similar titles—Obama's *Dreams from My Father* and McCain's *Faith of My Fathers*. The most compelling aspect of each candidate is his life story.

McCain's is a tale of sacrifice, heroism, and service, from a military brat's upbringing through the Naval Academy, into Vietnam and five years in captivity as a prisoner of war, followed by a steady climb to the top of the political greasy pole as one of the most important Senators of the era. Obama's is a classically improbable American success story about overcoming emotional adversity and finding a path for oneself, from a fatherless, half-Kansan, half-Kenyan wayward youth in Hawaii and Indonesia, into the Ivy League and then an astoundingly rapid ascent to his present standing as the most successful black political figure in American history.

With the undeniably significant exception of their contrasting positions on the war in Iraq, neither McCain nor Obama has constructed a candidacy primarily based on the policies he would enact in the White House. Neither vows to roll up his sleeves and make the necessary repairs to the nation's malfunctioning machinery; and to the extent that he does propose specific solutions, these seem grafted on to his candidacy rather than intrinsic to it. What makes both candidacies unique is that each promises to bring *others* together to solve the problems of the nation and the world. The means the new President will use to achieve his aim will be the force of words and the power of example—in other words, he will govern more through who he is than through the merit of his ideas.

So who is McCain? Who is Obama? In August, the two candidates were interviewed seriatim at Saddleback Church in Southern California. Its pastor, Rick Warren, asked each man why he wanted to be President. Obama replied: "I think I have the

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ability to build bridges across partisan lines, racial, regional lines to get people to work on some common-sense solutions to critical issues." McCain answered the same question by saying he wished "to inspire a generation of Americans to serve a cause greater than their self interest."

In essence, McCain was saying he seeks to *elevate* the American people; Obama was saying he wishes to *unify* them. To be sure, by elevating us, McCain also means to unify us, since in rising above self-interest we will be rising to the common interest. In the same way, Obama's unifying would also elevate us, since what could be more inspiring than genuine feelings of national brotherhood? Still, what is paramount for McCain is the elevation, and for Obama the unification.

At root, then, these two highly personal candidacies are more than personal. The contest between McCain and Obama has a distinct moral and philosophic dimension. One might even call it a metaphysical dimension, in the sense that each candidacy seeks to transcend present-day political boundaries and address voters in terms that are deeper and more elemental. McCain is a candidate of honor. Obama is a candidate of reconciliation.

John McCain is a student of history and lover of grand literature. He recounts these life-long passions in *Faith of My Fathers* and displays them in his other books, *Hard Call* and *Character Is Destiny*. However much these tomes may owe to his amanuensis, Mark Salter, they accurately reflect McCain's sensibility in a manner consistent with great works of the past that examine and celebrate the moral struggles of ordinary and extraordinary people.

Such struggles are perennial, since in every age the same impulses tempt human beings from the responsibilities of duty and the burdens of honor. Because these struggles between selfishness and selflessness help to shape history, it is fair to say that, for McCain, contemporary events are animated by the same forces and the same principles that have governed human affairs from time immemorial. Weapons change, but war persists. Over time, a free society's understanding of an abstract principle like justice may grow more expansive, yet, through it all, human nature itself does not change. If we forget this, we will disarm ourselves against dangers not only from without but also from within.

A person who recognizes what McCain himself has referred to as "the darker side of human nature" need not be blind to the lighter side, and McCain is anything but. Having taken on Obama in what one disgusted reporter, Michael Crowley of the *New Republic*, has termed "the most sarcastic campaign ever," McCain inclines toward a deflating humor that he aims both toward himself and toward interlocutors (especially journalists) he thinks take themselves too seriously. Still, a man for whom duty and honor are paramount will always be mindful of, and gravely serious about, the terrible vulnerability of the good, and will be animated by the desire to protect it. He will have something of the disposition of a sheriff, or knight errant. Think of McCain's instant solidarity with what he called the "brave little nation" of Georgia in the wake of the recent Russian invasion, and of his call for immediately admitting Georgia to NATO.

In his appearance at Saddleback Church, McCain was asked for a summary statement regarding the problem of evil: "Do we ignore it? Do we negotiate with it? Do we contain it? Do we defeat it?" Like Obama an hour before him, he affirmed the existence of evil as a force in the world. But unlike Obama, who mentioned a number of incontrovertible evils without naming any specific evildoers (tellingly, the only proper noun in Obama's answer was a place name, Darfur), McCain focused his answer exclusively on Islamic extremism and al Qaeda, an identifiable group at war with the United States. Obama called for a general "confrontation" with evil. McCain said flatly that he would "defeat it."

Perhaps more illuminating than his answer at Saddleback, though, is a theme McCain developed in a speech in May at Oakland University, in which he presented his "Vision for Defending the Freedom and Dignity of the World's Vulnerable." McCain suggested that the failure to fight evil diminishes us even when the evil does not materially threaten us:

> Confronting evil has never been easy—in our age or any other. But the failure to do so affects even those who are complacent with our own blessings and secure in our human rights. Accepting the degradation of values we believe are universal is to relinquish some of our own humanity. America was founded on the belief in the inherent dignity of all human life and that this dignity can only be preserved through shared respect and shared responsibility. We can retain our own freedom when others are robbed of theirs, but not the sense of virtue that made our revolution a moral as well as political crusade, and which recognizes that personal happiness is so much more than pleasure, and requires us to serve causes greater than self-interest.



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The journalist E.J. Dionne has aptly described the "moral style" that characterizes McCain's speeches and books: "It begins with self-deprecation. . . . It then moves to a realistic and not particularly optimistic view of human nature. But it finally arrives at a heroic sense of human possibility. Everything depends on the capacity of human beings to will themselves to transcend their egos." One does not join the struggle against evil as an out-of-the-box hero; it is the struggle against evil that turns an ordinary person into a hero.

As all of this suggests, McCain practices a highly moralized politics, but it is of a different order from the moralized politics we have come to know. Unlike most of the American politicians who claim to operate from a moral base, he does not possess a particularly religious sensibility. His perspective seems based as much in Stoicism (the spirit if not the doctrine) as in Christianity, with his emphasis on the nobility of service and the virtue of self-sacrifice.

On matters of domestic policy, McCain's moralistic brand of politics is not tied to a particular ideology, nor does it follow a partisan line. It is based, rather, in his determination to fight on behalf of the weak against the unjust aggregation of power by the strong—by the Big over the not-so-big. His targets over the years have included Big Tobacco, Big Oil, Big Pharma, Big Cable Companies, and the lobbyists who represent their interests in Washington. For McCain, the size of these adversaries is a key element in the threat they pose. They owe their successes, in his view, to the unfair advantages of largeness rather than to the proper workings of the free market in business and ideas.

This perspective offers a useful way of understanding McCain's idiosyncratic departures from conservatism and the agenda of the Republican party. He shares with other Republicans a deep distrust of another large force, Big Government, and his default position on issues of less than passionate concern to him (like abortion) is usually straight out of the standard GOP platform. But he departs from his party and from contemporary conservatism when he deems they are aligned with the self-interest of the powerful, i.e., the wealthy.

He explained his opposition to the Bush tax-rate reductions of 2001 in just such terms: "I cannot in good conscience support a tax cut in which so many of the benefits go to the most fortunate among us at the expense of middle-class Americans who most need tax relief." If this example seems tainted by McCain's lingering anger over his defeat at the hands of George W. Bush in the 2000 primary campaign, then consider instead his undeniably aggressive assaults on the drug companies and Wall Street, neither of which has any particular connection to Bush (and both of which are prominently featured in McCain's television advertising).

McCain's political moralism, like all moralism, can degenerate into self-righteousness on occasion, never more so than in the case of his campaign-finance legislation. When faced with legitimate and serious objections to its provisions on constitutional grounds, he frequently reacted with impatience and anger, and a tendency to impute dishonorable motives to his opponents. In defending his position, he was prepared to flout a basic founding principle of the United States, as when he told the radio host Don Imus that "I would rather have a clean government than one where quote First Amendment rights are being respected, that has become corrupt. If I had my choice, I'd rather have the clean government." In this instance, and in others, McCain's moralism has proved corrupting.

Nonetheless, when his moralism is grounded in the qualities of virtue exemplified by his own life, it has a potency that cannot be matched by the moralism of the ideological true believer or the partisan who excuses the failings of those with whom he shares an affiliation even as he spews fire and brimstone at those on the other side who break the rules.

McCain's political affect is, in the end, grounded in non-partisanship, though of an unusual kind. His is not the non-partisanship of the straddler, who fears giving offense; nor that of the pragmatist, who leaves it to others to concern themselves with ends and principles. Rather, McCain seeks to rise above partisanship by going *beneath* it, by exemplifying and appealing to ancient ideals of personal honor. McCain's appeal is, therefore, essentially *pre*-partisan.

INTERESTINGLY, Barack Obama's defenders and supporters have consistently used the term "*post*-partisan" to describe him. Obama vaulted into the first rank of American politicians in 2004 with a speech in which he repudiated the country's divisions:

> There is not a liberal America and a conservative America—there is the United States of America. There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America—there's the United States of America. The pundits, the pundits like to slice-and-dice our country into red states and blue states; red states for Republicans, blue states for Democrats. But I've got news for them, too. . . .



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> We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America.

He has deepened and broadened that portrait this year, promising to be an agent of national reconciliation and to bring an end to efforts to separate us.

Obama's post-partisanship is also post-historical. While the lessons of history—what they can teach us about the dangers we face—are central to McCain's worldview, they play very little role in Obama's. For him, history is less a source of wisdom about the constancy of human nature than it is a tragic horror that must be overcome, just as a traumatic childhood must be overcome. The tale history tells is one of oppression and injustice, and its tendrils extend into the present like weeds, interfering with the proper reordering of society. As Michelle Obama, speaking at the Democratic national convention, said of the Obama daughters:

> I think about how one day, they'll have families of their own and how one day, they . . . will tell their own children about what we did together in this election. They'll tell them how this time, we listened to our hopes instead of our fears, how this time, we decided to stop doubting and to start dreaming; how this time, in this great country . . . we committed ourselves to building the world as it should be.

"The world as it should be" will bear little resemblance to anything that has preceded it. Obama described it this way at the end of the primary season:

> Generations from now, we will be able to look back and tell our children that this was the moment when we began to provide care for the sick and good jobs to the jobless; this was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal; this was the moment when we ended a war and secured our nation and restored our image as the last, best hope on earth. This was the moment—this was the time—when we came together to remake this great nation so that it may always reflect our very best selves and our highest ideals.

Obama's detractors complain that his vaulting rhetoric is empty, and it often is from the standpoint of politics—from "yesterday's politics," he would say. But it does have meaning. Change, Hope, a New World: these words may be maddeningly free of substance, but they point to substance. They point toward a metaphysics, just as inspiring pulpit oratory might point toward an eschatological theology.

What is the root of Obama's metaphysics? I have already indicated the answer: unity. In speech after speech, Obama has presented unity as both the means to and the result of the "hope and change" his candidacy offers.

To be sure, bringing together people of good faith in both parties to solve problems is a campaign cliché of long standing. George W. Bush put just such a promise at the center of his presidential campaign in 2000. But Obama's call for unity is something new. He is not saying he can work with Senators of the rival party to pass a piece of well-meaning legislation. He is saying he can heal the nation's rifts—its racial divide, primarily—and thereby find a way to heal other rifts as well. In a January speech at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s pulpit, Obama invoked King's statement, in response to the trial of Rosa Parks in 1955, that "unity is the great need of the hour," and updated it to the present moment:

> Unity is how we shall overcome. . . . Unity is the great need of the hour—the great need of this hour. . . . All too often when we talk about unity in this country, we've come to believe that it can be purchased on the cheap. We've come to believe that racial reconciliation can come easily—that it's just a matter of a few ignorant people trapped in the prejudices of the past, and that if the demagogues and those who exploit our racial divisions will simply go away, then all our problems would be solved. . . . But of course, true unity cannot be so easily won. It starts with a change in attitudes—a broadening of our minds, and a broadening of our hearts.

That revolution in consciousness must also occur in America's relations with the rest of the world, and here too Obama wants to bridge a chasm. It was in support of this promise that he made his somewhat offhand remark in a 2007 debate about meeting with the leaders of enemy countries "without preconditions."

Over the past year, he has attempted to add various provisos and subsidiary clauses to that phrase to dull the deleterious effect of the idea that the President of the United States should treat the dictators of North Korea and Venezuela as though they were his equal. And yet his "without preconditions" comment was certainly a vital element in the tsunami of enthusiasm that greeted his presence in the Democratic race in the last month of 2007 and the first two months of 2008. It represented a fundamental break with George W. Bush's more aggressive approach; rather than isolating



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those who oppose the United States, Obama would instead seek to find a path down which they might walk together.

OBAMA'S JULY address before multitudes in Berlin offers the fullest expression of this break with Bush. The speech follows a trajectory from the conventional politics of the present day to a new politics grounded in a post-historical metaphysical vision. In the opening section, Obama describes how the Soviet Union sought through blockade in 1947 "to extinguish the last flame of freedom in Berlin," and how that challenge, in Obama's rendering, was met and defeated through the power of unity:

> The people of Berlin refused to give up. And on one fall day, hundreds of thousands of Berliners came here, to the Tiergarten, and heard the city's mayor implore the world not to give up on freedom. "There is only one possibility," he said. "For us to stand together united until this battle is won. . . . The people of Berlin have spoken. We have done our duty, and we will keep on doing our duty. People of the world: now do your duty. . . . People of the world, look at Berlin!"

Obama tells the story powerfully, though falsely. Berlin was not saved by "standing together united"; it was rescued by the United States and its airlift.

After this passage there comes a fascinating shift in tone. The summons to unity so stirringly delivered by Mayor Ernst Reuter turns out to have been a prelude, both rhetorically and historically, to a far greater event. For just as unity saved Berlin after World War II, Obama says, it saved Germany 42 years later when the Berlin Wall fell: "People of the world, look at Berlin—where a wall came down, a continent came together, and history proved that there is no challenge too great for a world that stands as one."

This too, to put it mildly, is an odd way of looking at historical events, in this case during the months leading up to the destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989. True, Germans on both sides of the wall welcomed its fall. But this was hardly remarkable: both populations, East and West, had always wanted it to go. (Remember why the wall was built in the first place.) If, moreover, unity may be said to have brought the wall down, it was solely unity in the West, unity *in opposition* to a regime and ideology that had sought to impose a darker sort of unity on the world since 1917. As McCain himself offered in rejoinder: "The cold war ended not because the world stood 'as one,' but because the great democracies came together, bound together by sustained and decisive American leadership."

Obama's idiosyncratic interpretation of the events of 1989 is a necessary bridge to his invocation of the need for unity today:

> Partnership and cooperation among nations is not a choice; it is the one way, the only way, to protect our common security and advance our common humanity. That is why the greatest danger of all is to allow new walls to divide us from one another. The walls between old allies on either side of the Atlantic cannot stand. The walls between the countries with the most and those with the least cannot stand. The walls between races and tribes; natives and immigrants; Christian and Muslim and Jew cannot stand. These now are the walls we must tear down.

While Obama is always careful to acknowledge that aggressors still stalk the earth, that acknowledgement provides merely a minor qualification of his overall worldview. He has great faith in the power of diplomacy and other mechanisms of "soft power" to defuse aggressive intent. He presents international challenges as global problems that arise from no particular agency and can be solved by no particular agency but only by *everyone* working together.

And his attention to foreign affairs gravitates to those issues that either transcend national boundaries or in some other way bespeak a need for oneness: reversing global warming, securing loose nuclear material, curtailing the drug trade, overcoming poverty and violence in the developing world, and doing something (not exactly sure what) about genocide in Darfur. These are the "new dangers" he cited in Berlin, dangers that require a unified global response and that are the reason why "the greatest danger of all is to allow new walls to divide us from one another."

If McCain's worldview occasionally leads to self-righteousness in the face of stubborn resistance, how will Obama react when, inevitably, new walls do divide us from one another? The depth of Obama's emotional investment in his vision of unification is unknowable. What does seem clear, however, is that although he tends to speak about problems in terms of impersonal forces, he takes himself seriously as an agent and facilitator of change. If the change he believes in does not happen as easily or as quickly as he thinks it should, Obama might well interpret the obstacles in his path as personal affronts and greet them with



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anger, as he apparently became angry at his one-time mentor Jeremiah Wright only after the pastor called into question Obama's claim to be a different kind of politician.

Recall now the similar titles of the respective memoirs of the two candidates. Both evoke something timeless, but in wildly and instructively different ways. McCain's title is *Faith of My Fathers*. It suggests that we must live within a tradition guided by the permanent things, the things that do not change. Obama's title is *Dreams from My Father*. It implies that we must focus our minds on what has not yet been. McCain evokes tradition. Obama evokes transcendence. And this is the metaphysical difference between them, with profound implications for the policies each would enact were he to be elected President.

McCain's confrontational approach arises from his view that the basic sources of injustice are inherent in human nature, but that injustice can be overcome by men and women of honor performing acts of heroism that will change the world for the better. Obama's belief in "soft power" arises from his contrasting view that the sources of international conflict, though tenacious, can be overcome by an appeal to something even deeper in human nature—if not quite natural goodness, then something like a hunger for respect that turns violent only when we refuse to satisfy it.

The implications for domestic policy are no less pronounced. To start this time with Obama, his conception of unity is grounded in the view that one's true self-interest lies in community. As he said in his convention speech in August: "Individual responsibility and mutual responsibility; that's the essence of America's promise." In pursuit of that promise of mutual responsibility, he possesses an unyielding belief in the redeeming power of political action, not just as a useful instrument but as an end in itself. That belief would likely lead to increased governmental scope, a penchant for redistributionist economics, an activist judiciary giving voice to an evolving public ethos, and the advancement of social liberalism.

McCain's philosophical disposition would be less apt to lead to such sweeping ambitions in domestic affairs. Rather, we might expect two kinds of moral crusades: first, as we've already seen in his various campaigns against the Big, efforts to combat perceived unfairness and abuses of power; second, an attempt to overcome the cowardice (as he might view it) that has kept the country from taking on looming structural problems like entitlement and immigration reform. Neither of these crusades is ideological, and there can be little doubt that solutions to the structural problems would include much that would stray from Republican-party orthodoxy.

The November presidential election will determine which of two competing visions, honor or unity, the traditional or the transcendent, has greater purchase with the electorate. There is no knowing which will prevail, or, more important, how long it will prevail once it begins to govern. The only thing we can be sure of is that, whatever the outcome of the ensuing governance, it will be interpreted very differently by adherents of the two opposing visions—and neither McCain's appeals to honor nor Obama's appeals to unity are likely to heal the breach between them.



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# Forgetting Zion

*Ruth R. Wisse*

A Jewish child growing up as I did in Montreal during the 1940's absorbed Zionism as naturally as Canadian ground did the snow in springtime. Our island city was divided between Catholic French and Protestant English, their rights equally protected by the state. The division between these two populations along ethnic and religious lines increased the staying power of other minorities, our own included; most Jewish children attended Jewish schools, all but two of which were Zionist in orientation.

My school, for example, asked students in the upper grades to raise money annually for something called the "Histadrut." We were given booklets containing about twenty coupons arranged by color in denominations ranging from 25 cents to a dollar and we went door to door, inspecting the jambs for mezuzahs. I had no idea that the Histadrut was the labor union associated with the dominant Labor Zionist party, and I suspect that those who bought the coupons similarly assumed that they were supporting the Zionist project as a whole. My classmates and I very much enjoyed being foot soldiers in the national cause: our sense of the Jews as a cohesive and, on the whole, generous people was everywhere reinforced at home, at school, and on the street.

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Were things different south of the Canadian border? It didn't seem so. Though Jews there were blending more quickly into the mainstream, the American students whom I met at regional youth conferences in the 1950's were no less passionately Jewish and Zionist than I. And why not? Zionism was both a natural and logical instance of the then-general phenomenon of emerging nation states and a keen expression of the human instinct for justice. Now that Palestinian Jewry, or the yishuv, had fought for and won its independence, and was on the road (so we thought) to gaining the acceptance of its Arab neighbors, Zionism as a revolutionary movement was quite properly morphing into a movement to support the country that it had helped bring into being.

To be sure, the emergence of Jewish Israel was not quite so unexceptional as the emergence of other postwar states. Not only had Jews been deprived of their political sovereignty for almost two millennia, they had just been subjected to genocide in Europe. Whatever forces had combined to set them apart in the past could not be overcome in a single day or year. But, on the other hand, Israel could also claim more "rights" to its existence than virtually any other nation.

There were, first of all, the Jews' ancestral rights to the Land of Israel, as laid down in the Hebrew Bible. Although the boundaries of the Promised Land were open to dispute, the promise itself had been registered in one of the most highly dissemi-



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nated books in the world, the fount of three major religions. And Jews had always regarded the Land of Israel as their land, perpetually mourning its loss, observing its calendar and laws, praying in its direction, and frequently migrating to it over the centuries.

For another thing, Jewish rights to the Land of Israel had been recognized by the League of Nations in 1922 and ratified by the United Nations General Assembly in 1947. For still another, the Zionist movement had purchased large tracts of land in Palestine, and on those lands successive waves of Jewish immigrants had established new communities and repopulated existing towns and cities; many had laid down their lives to "drain the swamps and make the desert bloom." Finally, in its role as the national home and refuge of world Jewry, the new state of Israel, still reeling from the losses of the 1948-9 war of independence, opened its doors to the most damaged survivors of Hitler's Holocaust and to Jews fleeing persecution from Arab lands—in this way, too, fulfilling dramatically its claim to national legitimacy.

With the establishment of modern Israel, then, American Jews had joined every other immigrant group, including descendants of the *Mayflower*, in having somewhere out there a "native" homeland. Zionism transformed American Jews from a forever desperate immigrant community seeking refuge into an ethnic-religious minority with an "old-country home" like the Roman Catholic Italians or Irish. In 1964, the Israel Day parade in New York took its place alongside its Columbus and St. Patrick's Day counterparts. Leon Uris's novel *Exodus* (1958), extolling the rebirth of Israel, became the biggest American best-seller since *Gone with the Wind*.

Zionism's realization in the state of Israel left American Jews sitting pretty. Recognition of Judaism as one of America's major religions, acceptance of Jewish studies as a normal part of a college curriculum, and tolerance of Jews by a growing majority of the American public—all these followed, directly or indirectly, from the demonstration that Jews now had a land of their own. Israel inspired sectors of Christian America to recognize their own affinities with Jews. Not least, political support for Israel also grew, eventually becoming one of the most unifying issues in the United States Congress.

For Jews themselves, it sometimes even seemed that, thanks to Israel's emergence, the "great tasks that have united the Jewish people for the past hundred years and more are reaching their successful conclusion." So spoke the late political theorist Daniel Elazar on Israel's 50th anniversary in 1998, voicing the hope that Jews might now be free to devote themselves increasingly to "quality of life" issues rather than having to respond to crisis after national crisis. If that was indeed the case, then Zionism could be said to have well and truly completed its work.

BUT THE truth, of course, is otherwise. From the very beginning, what set Zionism apart from other national-liberation movements was its nemesis: *anti*-Zionism. Unlike every other new member state of the United Nations, from Algeria to Zimbabwe, Israel, from birth, had been denied its national legitimacy. The front-line deniers were the seven founding states of the Arab League, later joined by fifteen additional members. Refusing to accept the partition of Palestine as originally envisaged by the UN, or, after 1948, to resettle those Palestinian Arabs who had fled their homes in the war of independence, Arab leaders created the idea of a *nakba*—a Palestinian catastrophe. This, in a transparent effort to turn attention away from their own aggressive misdeeds, they laid at the feet of the Jews.

In fact, the Palestinians formed a relatively small and fortunate group among the untold numbers of 20th-century refugees, having been displaced only several miles from their homes and to places where they shared the majority's culture and language. Nevertheless, in contrast to the 20 million refugees generated by the contemporaneous Pakistan-India conflict and Korean war, all of whom were resettled without being made to serve anyone else's political aims, they alone were consigned to permanent refugee status. Not content with the attempt to deny Jews their rightful land, Arab leaders compounded the aggression by accusing Jews of denying Palestinians theirs.

Thus did an otherwise normal process of national self-emancipation become arrested in its infancy by the abnormal hostility directed against it. Arab "rejectionism"—defined by Daniel Pipes as the intent to destroy Israel—made not just the Jewish state but Jews everywhere politically idiosyncratic once again. And among the varied branches of the Jewish people, American Jews, then in the midst of their own relatively effortless integration into a democratic, pluralistic society, may have been caught the most unprepared.

IN ITS effects on political and psychological reality, the Arab war against Israel replicated the situation sketched by Jean-Paul Sartre in his 1946 study *Réflexions sur la question juive* (the title in English is *Anti-Semite and Jew*). According to Sartre's



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scheme, the archetypal modern "anti-Semite," to whom liberal democracy is nothing but a Jewish conspiracy, cannot be reached by way of reason-based evidence, because his convictions are not based on fact and are not subject to argument. Facing this wall of antipathy, the "Jew," therefore, is forced to react in one of two ways: "authentically," by affirming and living his Jewish identity, or "inauthentically," by trying to squirm out of it. Sartre's portrait also includes a third party. This is the enlightened "democrat," who, although opposed in principle to the anti-Semite, pretends that the problem of anti-Semitism does not exist.

The same three actors could be seen functioning in the post-1948 scenario, with the place of the anti-Semite taken by Arab and Muslim leaders whose opposition to Israel could not be mitigated or dislodged through reason, and the place of the democrat by Western leaders who did not want to antagonize the oil-rich Arabs by even so much as acknowledging the fact of their war against the Jews. As for the Jews, they too were in their place, confronted with the need either to defend Israel forthrightly or, implicitly or explicitly, to hold *it* responsible for causing the Arabs' aggression against it.

Ignorant of Judaism, Sartre was mistaken in thinking that anti-Semitism was what made Jews Jewish. But he was right to insist that, so long as the Jewish body politic was under attack, no individual Jew could hope to avoid being implicated in the drama set in motion by this new form of state-sponsored anti-Semitism.

Initially, Arab leaders threatening to drive the Jews of Israel into the sea borrowed freely from the racist rhetoric of Nazi Germany. By the early 70's, however, and mirroring the military alliance forged between the Arab and Soviet blocs, the terminology of anti-Zionism had begun to borrow much more from the Left than from the Right; its quintessential ideological expression was the 1975 UN resolution equating Zionism with racism. While this shift signified no essential change in the nature of Arab opposition to Israel, it made all the difference to the targeted Jews, who were vulnerable to it as they never were to charges from the Right.

How so? By an irony of history, Hitler's Final Solution had fixed its own archetypal image of modern-day anti-Semitism: the image, in short, of Nazi storm troopers. "Holocaust education," a growing fashion by the 1970's, had hardened this connection in the popular mind. But Holocaust-education curricula, like the one tacitly propounded by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, inevitably suggest a happy ending: Hitlerism, after all, was crushed. The museum event went so far as to expunge from its exhibits virtually any reference to other contemporaneous expressions of anti-Semitism, whether the role played by the Palestinian Arab leader Haj Amin al-Husseini in Hitler's program of genocide or Stalin's anti-Jewish campaigns before and after World War II. By focusing on the only variety of anti-Semitism that went down to defeat, Holocaust education made it that much harder to confront new forms of anti-Semitism. Today, in an era of steadily mounting aggression both verbal and physical, it still does.

THE FIXATION on the Nazi model is not the only obstacle, however. Another has been the very success of America in encouraging full and equal participation of all in the country's national life. The movement of Jews into the middle and upper classes—an unalloyed blessing—exacted a price in communal solidarity and group cohesion. One consequence has been a diminished appetite among American Jews for fighting a hatred that does not seem to have *them* as its primary target. This is hardly to minimize the effectiveness of agencies like AIPAC, the Anti-Defamation League, or the American Jewish Committee, or of media-monitoring and advocacy organizations, or of the commentators and intellectuals, many clustered around COMMENTARY, who consistently rally support for Israel in America. Yet, as social scientists have long since observed, most American Jews continue to depart from the normal political pattern, habitually cleaving to a "universalist" agenda even when that agenda shows little or no concern for *their* proper concerns. Tellingly, George W. Bush's support for Israel garnered him no political payoff from American Jews.

If some Jews ignore the escalating aggression against their people, others minimize the danger or blame its persistence on the alleged recalcitrance or bellicosity of their fellow Jews. In this vein, a new Jewish organization, J Street, targets the strongest defenders of Israel, including AIPAC, precisely *because* they strongly defend Israel (and thus supposedly rob it of its freedom to make diplomatic concessions). Needless to say, no other American minority works this way, much less one whose homeland remains under enemy fire. Sartre's scenario explains how the extreme nature of such enmity can itself create so anomalous a pattern of internal defection.

A third impediment to the ongoing struggle for Israel is more specific: the legacy of anti-Zionism among Jews themselves. Opposition to Zionism at the beginning of the 20th century was common to



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several religious branches of Jewry, including the so-called ultra-Orthodox, who believed that only God could rightfully restore the Jews to Zion, and Reform, which in its own words considered Jews "no longer a nation, but a religious community." (The majority of both these groups eventually changed their views.) On the political front, revolutionary Marxists opposed Jewish nationalism in favor of the new internationalist order that was expected to form along class lines—in Lenin's view, anyone who directly or indirectly embraced the idea of a Jewish national culture was "an enemy of the proletariat, . . . an accomplice of the rabbis and the bourgeoisie." As for the Jewish Socialist Bund, it believed in furthering the cause of progressive politics in the communities where Diaspora Jews already lived.

The Arab assault on Israel's legitimacy has reawakened some of these long-ago antagonisms, encouraging their reemergence in modern form. Although the most shocking exemplars of the phenomenon are surely the rabbis of Neturei Karta, a delegation of whom embraced Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at the 2006 "conference" in Iran denying the Holocaust, much greater damage is caused by leftist Jews who identify objectively with the Arab cause. A concatenation of political forces similar to the one that forged the Arab-Soviet alliance at the United Nations in the 1960's and 1970's can be seen nowadays on American campuses. There, a loose coalition between Arab or Muslim students and leftists, many of the latter of whom are Jews, acts out a campaign of hostility whose origins lie in the teachings of Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky.

IN A recent essay, "Anti-Semitism and the Left that Doesn't Learn," Mitchell Cohen, the editor of the socialist quarterly *Dissent*, has warned his fellow leftists that their brand of anti-Zionism currently serves the same anti-liberal ends that it once did under Stalin. Cohen condemns the "fixation on Israel/Palestine within parts of the Left, often to the exclusion of all other suffering on the globe," and bemoans the extent to which leftist college students have been forced to choose between defending Israel and staying "progressive." Unfortunately, he seems not have noticed how some have resolved this difficulty—namely, by claiming to be supporting Israel while attacking it.*

An example from my own university. Last spring, the Progressive Jewish Alliance, a group at Harvard, announced that it was bringing to campus a traveling exhibit of political art called *Breaking the Silence*, based on the experience of 64 Israeli soldiers who had served in Hebron shortly after the end of the second *intifada* and subsequently compiled videos, photographs, and written testimony to convey the harm they believe they did while policing the Palestinian Arab population. The exhibition was cosponsored by an array of adult organizations—Americans for Peace Now, the Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace, the Foundation for Middle East Peace, Hashomer Hatzair, Jewschool.com, Meretz USA, the Moriah Fund, the New Israel Fund, Open Society Institute, and the Union of Progressive Zionists—that use campus groups to promote their own political programs.

Though the anonymous authors of this exhibition prided themselves on their "meticulous research, including fact-checking and cross-checking with other witnesses," they conspicuously omitted from their show any hint of the circumstances that led to the presence of these Israeli soldiers in Hebron in the first place, or indeed any historical context establishing Israel's need to defend itself against Arab terror. Thus, the exhibit and accompanying text fail to mention the Oslo Accords of 1993, whereby Israel agreed to a transfer of power and responsibilities to the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza in return for PLO recognition of the right of the state of Israel to exist in peace and security and the PLO's renunciation of the use of terrorism and other acts of violence, with both parties stipulating that until a permanent agreement was reached, Israel would remain responsible for security. The historically unprecedented risk Israel took in signing this document was rewarded in short order by the PLO's incitement of a terror campaign that, in the two years between 2002 and 2004 alone, would claim more than 600 Israeli dead and 4,000 wounded.

The omission of any mention of this worst period of violence in Israel's history makes it possible for *Breaking the Silence* to portray Israeli officers and soldiers policing a terrorist-ridden area as so many brutes and random sadists. And what, meanwhile, about the *Jewish* connection to Hebron, the place where Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah lie buried? The exhibit notes only that the city is "sacred to both Jews and Muslims," but otherwise takes it for granted that while Arabs have a perfect right to live there, Jewish "settlers" have none. More than one anonymous soldier is quoted voicing his alienation from the local

* Cohen also seems to have felt obliged by feelings of collegiality to preface his case against his fellow leftists with a ritual condemnation of "all Israeli settlements in the occupied territories," a blast at Benjamin Netanyahu for supposedly sharing responsibility with Yasir Arafat in scuttling the Oslo accords, and a denunciation of "American Jewish organizations that pander to American or Israeli right-wingers"—all this in the opening paragraph!



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Jews he is charged with protecting and his affinity for the Palestinians "who were *supposedly* threatening them" (emphasis added).

And so it went. Alarmed by the likely effect of the show's appearance on campus, Harvard Students for Israel, a group that had been formed a few years earlier in response to growing anti-Israel propaganda at the university, tried to dissuade the sponsors of *Breaking the Silence* from bringing it to Cambridge. Having failed in this effort, it then suggested that the exhibit be moved to Hillel House, the meeting-place for Jewish students at Harvard—the idea being that this was better than letting it be shown, as scheduled, at the more heavily trafficked Kennedy School of Government. Hillel House obliged, on the grounds that as an inclusive organization it had to accommodate the full range of Jewish views.

As it happens, I toured the exhibit with Hillel Halkin, the well-known critic and COMMENTARY contributor, who was then visiting Harvard from Israel. Halkin felt that, notwithstanding the risk of wider exposure elsewhere, the show should not have been mounted under Jewish auspices. A similar view was aired by the Zionist Organization of America, which fired off an emphatic public letter to the Jewish press; this duly elicited protests from the Hillel director and the chair of Harvard Students for Israel, both of whom were now placed in the position of defending an exhibit they did not endorse.

Of the students I spoke with who abhorred the exhibit, most also defended its right to be shown at Hillel, and on the same "free speech" grounds that are routinely invoked to justify the appearance of anti-Israel speakers and events everywhere. In this way, leftist Jewish organizations get to flaunt their moral progressivism by taking up the cause of the "oppressed Palestinian Arabs," in the process supplying Jewish ammunition for the anti-Zionist assault and deterring others from pursuing the worthier and morally sounder objective of defending the Jewish state.

THIS BRINGS us to the last and most serious obstacle to a full-throated Zionism, which is the influence on American Jewish opinion exercised by sectors of Israel's own Left and liberal Left. Its embodiment is David Landau, until recently the editor-in-chief of Israel's daily *Haaretz*, who believes that Israel should be "squeezed" by the United States into making concessions to the Arabs that it might otherwise regard as contrary to its defensive needs. At a gathering of Israeli leaders with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice this past year, Landau invited Washington to "rape Israel into resolving the problem" of the disputed territories.

"'Rape' is a word in the English language," Landau later explained without apology, averring that he had been urging U.S. pressure against Israel ever since the 1970's. According to this view, heavily promoted by the English-language edition of *Haaretz*, Israel bears primary responsibility for the aggression against it and, whatever the democratic will of its electorate or the considered judgment of its political and military leaders, must be forced to make amends. Israeli proponents of this view often compare themselves with American protesters of the Vietnam war in the 1960's and 70's. They fail to consider that, if so, Israel is not playing the role of the U.S. in the analogy but rather that of South Vietnam.

NO DOUBT the Israeli ex-soldiers who gathered the material for *Breaking the Silence* had experienced severe emotional distress of the kind that scars every sensitive person who goes into combat. Their private scruples deserve the compassion of a Jewish public that survives thanks to their soldiering, but also the firm guidance of a public that needs their soldiering in order to live. There has never been anything like the Jewish conscience, forged over three millennia by a culture of self-accountability under the aegis of an exacting Judge. But neither has there ever been a war as protean and lop-sided as the Arab war against Israel.

One may excuse demobilized soldiers for wishing to ignore the political context of the struggle in which they were conscripted. Unfortunately, what is merely vulgar within Israel proper serves a far more corrupting function when it goes on the road. American university campuses, while not necessarily hostile to Israel, have become an intellectual war zone. The battlefield features ever more Muslim students for whom opposition to Israel is a matter of religious faith, anti-Israel exhibits like *Breaking the Silence* purveying wild accusations of Jewish brutality, a cadre of uninformed or biased professors who accept or disseminate the Palestinian "narrative," and Jewish student enablers of the kind we have met.

These days, alas, those who are truly breaking the consensus on American campuses are the minority of pro-Israel students who strive to provide the political and historical correctives to anti-Zionist propaganda. "What's the matter with those Israeli soldiers?" one of my students asked me, mulling in anguish over the recent exhibit. "Don't they feel the disconnect between their protestations of peace and the hateful effect they've created on campus?" Others are less gentle. "It would be the



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end of Harvard Students for Israel if it ever fell into the hands of Israelis," said one. The moral confidence that Israel once exported to American Jews, these students feel they must now export to Israel.

I BEGAN BY recalling the contribution of Zionism and the state of Israel to the confidence of North American Jewry. Were the story told in full, it would include many more instances: Israel's mobilization of the movement for Soviet Jewry that helped open the gates of the world's longest-lasting totalitarian regime; Israel's successful intervention on behalf of Ethiopian Jews, which rescued a whole lost segment of the Jewish people; Israel's supply of Jewish scholars, teachers, and cultural ambassadors to an American Jewry in dire cultural straits. Nor, taking in more than the Jewish community alone, can one ignore Israel's 1982 strike on Iraq's nuclear reactor, yielding benefits to humankind beyond calculation, and not least, Israel's absorption of the brunt of Islamist and Arab anti-Western aggression.

*Exodus*, the novel that so thrilled Americans and sparked the refusenik movement of Soviet Jewry, tells the story of how a prototypical American, Kitty Freeman, overcomes her dislike of Jews by falling in love with a heroic Israeli. Hokey or not, this fictional romance projected the truism that Israeli Jewish grit had earned America's affection. Can we today be facing a situation when the opposite may prove equally true? Will the growing success of anti-Zionism turn Israel into a liability?

There is no shortage of signs. One of them is the readiness of some academics and foreign-policy professionals to hold Israel accountable for the war in Iraq and other putative recent failures of American foreign policy. Another is the hijacking of human-rights organizations and forums by anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist ideologues. Then there is the leftward drift of the Democratic party, propelled in part by the energies of liberal Jews: might this end by weakening America's tie to Israel and its vigilance against the common enemies of both countries?

The persistence and resurgence of anti-Zionism have undeniably sapped some of the self-confidence that Zionism instilled in the Jewish people. Arab belligerence has hammered away at Jewish optimism, including in Israel. How long can a society of builders withstand legions of destroyers? How long can Jews elsewhere be expected to rally to its side, especially at moments when Israel's desperate hunger for peace leads it to seem weak or even pathetic?

Yet here is where, oddly, American Jews could actually make a difference, and could do so by flexing their American muscles no less than their Jewish ones. American leaders, after all, still take open pride in the commonalities between the two countries. President Bush spoke thus to the Israeli Knesset on May 13:

> Our two nations both faced great challenges when they were founded, and our two nations have both relied on the same principles to help us succeed. We've built strong democracies to protect the freedoms given to us by an Almighty God. We've welcomed immigrants, who have helped us thrive. We've built prosperous economies by rewarding innovation and risk-taking and trade.

Bush went on to invoke the enduring alliance of the two countries in confronting terrorists and tyrants.

Though such morale-boosting sentiments do not always translate into action, they greatly reinforce the sense of the legitimacy of the Jewish national project. Indeed, America expects its citizens to root for their homeland as passionately as Bostonians and Angelenos cheer the Celtics and the Lakers. This expectation is especially appropriate in the case of Jews, who bear the scars of the most evil forces in history and whose enemies, like America's, are a roster of the world's autocrats, dictators, despots, tyrants, and terrorists.

Anti-Zionism in its most naked form is the mark of Arab and Muslim inhospitality, intolerance, and cruelty, and it will stain Arab and Muslim honor for as long as it endures—or longer, depending on how much damage it wreaks. But opposing it does not require defaming Islam, or returning malice for malice. What it requires is a sustained and relentless campaign to clear away the accretions of lies and disinformation and to make room for clarity and truth. One could begin such a campaign by asking why Arabs, who already have 640 times more land than Israel occupies in its entirety, believe that they have too little, and the Jews too much.

Distance from the battlefield, and well-protected freedoms, allow American Jews to make the case for Israel more forcefully than Israelis can make it for themselves. We (I include myself) are blessed with advantages greater than any Diaspora community has ever enjoyed, hence charged with greater responsibility than any Diaspora community has ever borne. History will ask only one question of our generation, and of the next one and the one after that: did you secure the state of Israel? Woe to an American Jewry that does not ensure a rousing reply in the affirmative.



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# Whatever Happened to Marc Chagall?

*Michael J. Lewis*

SOONER OR later, the reputation of every creative artist hardens into a kind of permanent fact, after which point only a sharp and massive shift in public sensibility can budge it. For artists who live to extreme old age, this process can take quite a while. Those lucky enough to become public figures find that their works are exempted from exacting judgment, and everything they do—good, bad, indifferent—is treated as equally fascinating. Eventually, however, the vivid personality recedes, leaving only the work.

That time seems to have come at last for Marc Chagall. When he died in 1985, a few months shy of his ninety-eighth birthday, Chagall was venerated as the last survivor of the first generation of European modernists. (Miró had died two years earlier.) For decades he had also been lionized as the world's preeminent Jewish artist, although the public commissions that poured his way were by no means exclusively Jewish: stained glass for the cathedrals of Reims and Metz, a Dag Hammarskjöld memorial at the United Nations, the great ceiling mural in the Paris Opera.

For all his public acclaim, however, it was no secret that Chagall's most vital work had been made on the eve of World War I, when he hurtled among St. Petersburg, Paris, and Berlin, creating his own amalgam of modern art and Eastern European Jewish folk culture. As early as 1965 *Time* could report, in an otherwise fawning profile, that his "major accomplishments [were] over by 1922."

It has always been difficult to untangle Chagall's two interlocking reputations—as a pioneer of modernism and as a major Jewish artist. To be sure, he was both. He experienced modernism's golden age in Paris, where he forged a highly personal synthesis of Cubism, Symbolism, and Fauvism that was widely influential and that would, after a certain period of incubation, give rise to Surrealism. At the same time, he was most emphatically a Jewish artist, whose work was one long dreamy reverie of life in his native Vitebsk.

Fortunately, it no longer seems necessary or even possible to assess Chagall's importance by calibrating his respective position toward Judaism and modernism. For one thing, a Jewish artist is no longer a rarity; since the 1950's, Jews have been major figures in painting, sculpture, and architecture (particularly the last, with such figures as Frank Gehry, Richard Meier, and Robert A. M. Stern). At the same time, the modern movement has long since ceased to be a unified or coherent force, a development freeing artists to be judged by criteria other than the extent to which they advanced or retarded its progress.

It is therefore timely that there should now ap-

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pear a major biography of Chagall.* Written by Jackie Wullschlager, the visual-arts critic of the *Financial Times*, it is the first to make full use of his correspondence with his first wife, Bella, and to give us access to the late Virginia Haggard, Chagall's companion from 1945 to 1952. It therefore offers a fuller and more detailed picture of its subject than we have yet had. But while it is revealing about Chagall the man, it is less so about Chagall the artist, and in the end one cannot help suspecting that readers will come away with a rather different impression from what the author intended.

MOVSHA SHAGAL was born in 1887 in the Belorussian city of Vitebsk, half of whose 66,000 inhabitants were Jewish. Called the "Russian Toledo" for its picturesque skyline of church and synagogue domes, the city was largely built of wood (little of which would survive the three years of Nazi occupation). Chagall's family circumstances were modest: his remote, pious father toiled in a herring warehouse, and his mother ran a small grocery business from their home.

As cosmopolitan an artist as he would later become, his storehouse of visual imagery would never expand beyond the landscape of his childhood, with its snowy streets, wooden houses, and ubiquitous fiddlers. To fix the scenes of childhood so indelibly in one's mind, and to invest them with an emotional charge so intense that it could only be discharged obliquely through an obsessive repetition of the same cryptic symbols and ideograms, would seem to require some early trauma. But nothing of the sort is related in Chagall's copious memoirs, other than his statement that he stuttered.

Visual art was not a part of the hasidic milieu in which Chagall grew up. Nonetheless, Jewish artists were already beginning to make their mark in czarist Russia, and he managed to study with two of them. His first teacher was Yehuda (Yuri) Pen, a realist who painted *plein-air* scenes of Jewish life and who ran a drawing school in Vitebsk; among his pupils were such future luminaries as El Lissitzky and Ossip Zadkine.

Bristling at Pen's realism, Chagall moved in 1906 to St. Petersburg, albeit clandestinely, for Jews were not then permitted in that city without a permit. After a turbulent time at a private drawing school—an exceptionally stubborn student, he seems to have quarreled with all of his teachers—he came to study with Léon Batsk, the celebrated set designer for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Batsk was a Jew most of the time (he converted temporarily to Lutheranism to marry the daughter of the founder of Moscow's great Tretyakov Museum), and he offered Chagall a different model from Pen's of Jewish success and achievement, and a far more cosmopolitan and sophisticated one.

At the same time, Bakst was essentially a maker of decorative art, the rules of which are different from those of easel painting. Forms that are to be seen from some distance need to be bold and lively in outline, and strong in color. The tendency is for form to become flatter, more rhythmic, and more linear, something at which Bakst, who admired the long sinuous lines of Art Nouveau, was singularly adept. All this left its mark on Chagall, who learned to place his figures on the canvas as if they were stenciled cut-outs, their eloquence made up almost entirely of their expressively straggling silhouettes.

Arrogant as he was toward his tutors, Chagall was evidently the picture of charming gratitude to the private benefactors, all of them Jewish, who underwrote his years of study in St. Petersburg and, beginning in the spring of 1911, in Paris. There he encountered modern art at the zenith of creative tumult. He would already have known about the Fauves and about Orphism, but black and white photographs would not have prepared him for the full chromatic intensity of Matisse or Odilon Redon. His palette quickly became high-keyed and shrill, and he lost the gloomy earth tones he had favored in Russia.

Paris must have been terrifying to a provincial Russian Jew, but it was also in a heady state of flux in which foreigners like Picasso could make their mark. Instead of being discouraged, Chagall seems to have been convinced that he could succeed there. He found allies in the modernist poets Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars, but the only notable painter he befriended was Robert Delaunay, whose wife Sonia, a Russian Jewess, was fond of Chagall.

If Delaunay's art was not as progressive as Picasso's, it was far more lyrical: when he painted the Eiffel Tower, its forms fractured into playful glinting shards as if the scaffolding had relaxed into a kind of rhythmic dance. Chagall found this more congenial than the reserved and solemn draftsmanship of Cubism. Delaunay would be the last major influence on his mature style, which by 1912—when Chagall was twenty-five—was largely complete.

MANY OF Chagall's Paris works were updated versions of paintings he had made in Russia, transposed into Fauvist or Cubist keys. The practice of recycling earlier compositions and

* *Chagall: A Biography* by Jackie Wullschlager. Knopf, 592 pp., $40.00.



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themes would become a lifelong habit, and is one of the great peculiarities of his career. In these Parisian years he developed a whole repertoire of quirky motifs: the ghostly figure floating in the sky, sometimes with a detached head and sometimes with a peddler's sack, the gigantic fiddler dancing on miniature dollhouses, the livestock with transparent wombs and, within them, tiny offspring sleeping upside down.

Given this uncanny gift for coining fresh and haunting symbols, with the rubbery logic of dreams, it is curious that he would repeat himself so deliberately. But in a certain sense they *were* dreams. The majority of his scenes of life in Vitebsk were painted in Paris, which gives them their undertone of yearning and loss, and also their detached and rather abstracted quality. Apollinaire was struck by this quality when he first visited Chagall's studio and exclaimed: "*surnaturel!*"

The anecdote, like most of our information about Chagall's early work, is known only from his own account. Still, there is no question that his animal/human hybrids and airborne phantoms were a formative influence on Surrealism. Apollinaire later changed the term *surnaturel* to *surréel*, which found its way into the Surrealist Manifesto of 1924. Chagall was flattered, but insisted that he himself was not among the Surrealists. He evidently did not like their exaltation of the arbitrary and the random, feeling that his own personal language of symbols was meaningful and thoroughly sincere.

It is also true that Chagall was an incorrigible loner and chronically incapable of affiliating with a school. This was not necessarily a disadvantage. The foreigner in Paris was an outsider, but with the freedom of an outsider to browse omnivorously without being forced personally to commit himself, one way or another, to a movement. Only American artists in Europe enjoyed a similar freedom at the time, when such figures as Max Weber and Marsden Hartley dabbled in modernism's arresting visual styles without adopting any underlying ideology or theory.

Chagall's Paris idyll came to an abrupt end in the summer of 1914. But in the final prewar months, he had the most important exhibition of his career. Strangely, this took place not in Paris but in Berlin, where his lurid colors and emotional intensity could be appreciated as a variant of expressionism. Chagall's patron was Herwarth Walden, a picturesque Jewish art dealer, and the one-man show brought together 40 of his best paintings, nearly all previously unseen. That the outbreak of the war prevented him from retrieving his work would prove to be a blessing in disguise. In the coming years the paintings would be frequently shown—and sold. By the time Chagall was able to travel to Germany again, he was regarded as a principal figure of modernism.

CHAGALL SPENT the wartime years in Russia. There he married Bella Rosenfeld, the bright and headstrong daughter of a prosperous Vitebsk jeweler. A daughter, Ida, was soon born. The euphoric paintings of this time, which show the young couple floating balloon-like over Vitebsk—its wooden buildings faceted in the Delaunay manner—are the most lighthearted of his career. The war itself did little to dampen his spirits: Bella's well-connected brother managed to keep him from the front and to allow him to perform his military duty at a desk job.

The October Revolution of 1917 and the ushering-in of the Bolshevik regime presented Chagall with both opportunity and peril. He was by now one of the Soviet Union's most distinguished artists and a member of the modernist avant-garde, which for the moment enjoyed extraordinary prestige as the aesthetic arm of the revolution. From his days in Paris, he was acquainted with the new commissar of education, who offered him the position of commissar of visual arts. But thinking perhaps of his own disinclination for paperwork, or perhaps of the dangers of such an exposed position, he declined. He settled instead for the position of commissar of arts for Vitebsk, a striking demonstration that, for all his cosmopolitan education, he was still something of a homebody.

Chagall's principal achievement was to found the Vitebsk Arts College, which for a time was the most distinguished school of art in the Soviet Union. Despite its provincial location (actually something of an asset in those years of urban famine), its faculty drew the most important artists in the country, not only Chagall but El Lissitzky and Kazimir Malevich. (In an amiable gesture, he added Yehuda Pen to the faculty.) The school did not seek to impart an official style, and Chagall characteristically stressed the importance of personal expression ("be careful not to erase the individual peculiarities of each person, while working in a collective").

This, however, proved politically naïve. Malevich, whose Suprematist art of squares and circles promised an objective and impersonal form of expression, had only scorn for bourgeois individualism. He and Lissitzky mocked what they called "the whole Chagallian eroticism of powdered ro-



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coco." Never terribly good at infighting, Chagall was helpless when the students and faculty mobilized against him. He returned from a trip to find his last friends dismissed and a sign on the school door proclaiming it the Suprematist Academy.

Chagall's resignation as commissar and move to Moscow brought him a more agreeable position: stage designer for the newly formed State Jewish Chamber Theater. For its scheduled grand opening in January 1921 with a trio of plays by Sholem Aleichem, he was given just six weeks to outfit the auditorium with an array of large decorative murals. His challenge was to find a visual language in keeping with the radical modernism espoused by the theater, which took as its model the non-naturalistic approach of Max Reinhardt. Actors were to be non-professionals without stage experience, and they were to communicate as much in gesture and movement as in dialogue. Chagall became a close friend of the most talented of them, a lawyer-turned-actor named Solomon Mikhoels whose wildly expressive face would feature prominently in the artist's murals.

Those murals owed much to Chagall's immersion in Bakst's decorative art. In the key work, a canvas eight yards long entitled *Introduction to the Jewish Theater*, he created a joyous rhythm of interlocking arcs through which passes a merry procession of dancers, fiddlers, acrobats walking on their hands, and bemused farm animals: one critic called it "Hebrew jazz in paint." Here was none of Chagall's characteristic self-absorption, only a fruitful subordination to the demands of the program itself, in which his storehouse of symbols and devices was exactly what was needed.

Sadly, the Jewish Theater work remains an aberration in his career. By the time he again made monumental murals, as in the Paris Opera, he was far too famous to take direction from a client.

GEORGE ORWELL once said that Mark Twain, having had the opportunity to become a great figure of literature, chose instead to be an after-dinner speaker. Something similar seems to have happened to Chagall, who after 1922 began very assiduously to market himself. He left Russia, ostensibly to transport work to an exhibition of Jewish art in Berlin, but with the explicit intention of emigrating for good; his wife and daughter followed shortly thereafter. No sooner was he out than he published his autobiography.

To write one's memoirs at the age of thirty-six is not necessarily a mark of excessive self-regard, especially if one has lived through the Russian Revolution and experienced the Paris School in its golden age. But it suggests that Chagall was thinking of all this as a closed chapter. At the same time, he began to re-create his earlier works—not, as he had once done, imaginatively, reinterpreting them in the light of some new stylistic discovery, but as literally as possible. In the case of items missing or no longer accessible, he attempted to do so by means of memory alone.

It is true that, as Wullschlager makes clear, he had good reason to devote himself to self-promotion. Passing through Berlin in 1922 to collect the paintings from his one-man show, he found that Walden had not only sold all of them but ostensibly put the sales revenues in escrow, and that he could not be held responsible for the German postwar hyperinflation that had rendered the receipts worthless. Furious and chastened, Chagall now came to prefer the security of binding contracts. He formed a relationship with Ambroise Vollard, the eminent French dealer, for whom he produced the etchings for a series of illustrated books: Gogol's *Dead Souls*, the Bible, and the *Fables of La Fontaine*. These represent his finest efforts at printmaking.

There is nothing in the last six decades of his life to compare—in terms either of artistic quality or of human interest—with the previous one. But this is not to say that Chagall's later life was uneventful. Chronically unworldly, he almost fell into Nazi hands in World War II. He tarried in Vichy France until the last moment and was saved only by Alfred Barr of New York's Museum of Modern Art, who had prepared a list of artists the United States should seek to extricate. Chagall, having figured prominently in the Nazis' "Degenerate Art" exhibition, was one of them; but he did not leave France until May 1941, when it was almost too late.

Chagall's American exile disoriented him, and he never properly learned English. As during all of his travails, he leaned heavily on Bella, not only for emotional support but for professional and even aesthetic guidance. It was she, he claimed, who determined at which point his paintings were finished. The truth is, for all his time in the modernist salons of Paris, skirmishing with Apollinaire and Cendrars, his formidable and outspoken wife was more the intellectual than he. And Bella had literary aspirations of her own. During their stay in New York, reverting to Yiddish, she produced two volumes of memoirs about the world of her childhood: *Brenendike Licht* (published as *Burning Lights* in 1945), and *Di Ershte Bagegnish* (*First Encounter*, 1947).

That world, she well knew, was disintegrating



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even as she wrote. During the summer of 1943 she and Chagall spent much time with Solomon Mikhoels and the Yiddish poet Itzik Feffer; the pair had been sent from Russia to solicit funds from American Jews. From them the Chagalls would hear firsthand accounts of how complete and pitiless was the Nazi destruction of Jewish Russia.* This clearly influenced the mournful, elegiac tone of Bella's memoirs, which would be her sole work. She died in 1944 of a simple streptococcus infection, untreatable because of the wartime shortage of penicillin.

Although distraught over the loss of Bella, from which he never quite recovered, Chagall was evidently unable to work without the comfort of a quiet family life. In short order he took up with Virginia Haggard, the estranged wife of a painter; when that relationship ended in 1952, he promptly married Valentina Brodsky, a Ukrainian Jewess who, like Bella, was cultured, multilingual, and an astute manager of Chagall's financial affairs. As the world quivered around him, Chagall worked to ensure a cocoon of his own, fey and detached, while a surprising number of the Jewish associates he had left behind in Russia were murdered, sooner or later, by the NKVD. Their number included Mikhoels, Walden—who had fled from Hitler to Stalin—and even poor Pen, killed weeks after Chagall recklessly sent him a jaunty letter in 1937.

CHAGALL'S STORY has been told before, most notably by Franz Mayer, Ida Chagall's husband and an art historian in his own right whose rich and detailed biography was published in 1964. But that book was silent about many aspects of the personal life (leaving unmentioned both Virginia Haggard and Chagall's child by her). Jackie Wullschlager is thus the first to offer an uncensored look at the painter's private life. (Not that the revelations are prurient: if anything, Wullschlager shows that Chagall was sexually prudish to a fault.)

An accomplished linguist who came to this project after decades of interest in Chagall, Wullschlager has personally translated sources in German, Yiddish, and Russian and presents a terrific amount of new material. In every respect, she has produced a lively, readable, and sympathetic biography, although unfortunately not the most penetrating one.

One of the problems in dealing with a figure like Chagall is his own incorrigible garrulousness. A compulsive talker and memoirist, he left behind a trove of recollections about his youth and travels that sometimes conceal more than they reveal. At times one has the sense that Wullschlager is dutifully paraphrasing Chagall's anecdotes while fleshing them out with context and an occasional polite correction. At other times she seems somewhat credulous—stating as fact, for example, that Chagall "was the most talented student" at his St. Petersburg school while admitting later that "nothing remains from this time." At still other times, she is excessively generous to his weaker work, treating, with only a few exceptions, every artistic change as an advance. In all, Wullschlager's long itinerary of anecdotes and incidents remains something of a diary, without the comprehensive view that comes from distance and detachment.

The book ends with Chagall's death. One especially wishes that Wullschlager had written an epilogue, suggesting what his art means to us today, in terms both of modernism and of Judaism.

It was long held that the great triumph of Cubism was to strip painting of those extra-pictorial considerations—subject matter, didactic content, moral sentiment—that compromised what ought to be a purely aesthetic experience. By this standard Chagall, who never relinquished subject matter or sentimentality, was rather a straggler in the march of modernism. But as I suggested at the outset, we are no longer obliged to use modernism as a rigid yardstick.

Instead, we are free to assess Chagall on his own terms and to see him for what he was: a minor master on the order of a William Blake or an El Greco, a painter whose achievement must be appreciated in personal terms and not by reference to a school or movement. If his gifts were limited, he exploited them intensely and with unusual urgency of feeling, and has earned a permanent place in the pantheon of artists who have spoken deeply about the secrets of the human heart.

In terms of Judaism and art, his contribution is a mixed one. On the one hand, and at worst, he is the maker of poster fodder for people who were introduced to modern art by his late-life, mass-produced lithographs on Jewish subjects, thereby gaining a taste for sentiment and kitsch that can often prove resistant to treatment. On the other hand, he remains the most important visual artist to have borne witness to the world of East European Jewry, a role he played with great distinction despite, and not because of, his immersion in the radical moder-

* During the visit, their daughter Ida had a romantic affair with the tragic Feffer. It was he who would later use sign language to inform the American singer Paul Robeson, in a bugged Moscow room, of Mikhoels's killing and his own imminent execution at Stalin's hands. Upon his return to the United States, the pro-Soviet Robeson, despite having been struck by the fact that Feffer's fingernails had been pulled out during torture, kept the news to himself.



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nity of Paris. For while he bravely tried on all that modernism had to offer, he remained in a deep sense a provincial naïf and, at his core, oddly impervious to influence.

It is striking how many of his limitations are those of folk art. There is the same high horizon, the filling-in of blank spaces with auxiliary figures, the strange shifts in scale that show hierarchical importance rather than recession in depth. Even his obsessive repetition of motifs recalls folk art. One thinks of an itinerant folk painter like Edward Hicks, who repeated his *The Peaceable Kingdom* again and again, almost as a ritual.

This is not to say that Chagall was a Jewish Grandma Moses, or a figure of only sentimental interest. The fact is that if the world of his childhood years did not have the high art of oil painting, it did have a distinct visual culture, expressed in media from embroidery to wagon painting to jewelry to decorative carpentry—all, incidentally, linear media. Long before he ever thought of being a painter, the young, stuttering Chagall had already absorbed a tactile sense of the world from his surroundings. This is the most poignant component of his art, and the one that kept him on an unvarying course even among the blandishments of Paris. (Paradoxically, it was the more sophisticated American painters, lacking the anchor of a settled traditional society, who were more likely to be disoriented by a prolonged stay in Paris.)

Given Judaism's religious inhibitions about pictorial art, it is not surprising that the most distinctive and celebrated Jewish art of the 20th century would be at the level of popular and folk imagery, or of such productions as *Fiddler on the Roof*, with its Chagall-haunted scenery (designed by Boris Aronson, his assistant at the Jewish Theater four decades earlier). If the overinflated and overmarketed artist of later years is now justifiably diminished, we can see all the better the curious, earnest provincial of 1911, who looked to express the private truths of his childhood in the rough and unfamiliar language of pictures, and inadvertently became the public witness of a now vanished civilization.



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OBSERVATIONS

# How Not to Write About Iraq

*Jonathan Foreman*

IN THE spring of 2005, I watched two U.S. Army units training Iraqi National Army soldiers at a base in Baghdad. One Iraqi brigade was in the care of a 100-man company belonging to an armor battalion of the Third Infantry Division. The company's officers and men lived on the base with the Iraqis, went on patrol with them, and sent complaints up the line when they found their trainees were being deprived of pay or food or equipment by the corrupt and incompetent Iraqi ministry of defense. Their *jundis*, as Iraqi soldiers are called, eventually became an effective unit.

Another Iraqi unit was being trained by members of an American cavalry regiment that commuted daily from a base 40 minutes away. Its commanding officer would occasionally turn up and make it clear that he considered the mission a waste of time and a distraction from the real war. The Iraqi troops under his tutelage never developed the tactical or marksmanship skills they needed, and their officers never adopted a U.S.-style leadership culture, preferring instead to treat their men almost as servants.

Both Iraqi brigades were eventually certified as fully trained by the United States, even though one was excellent and the other almost useless. The difference between the two was traceable entirely to the personalities of the Americans charged with responsibility for them. One was an armor captain who put his heart into the job, the other a lieutenant colonel of cavalry who thought the job beneath his dignity. The captain helped win the war; the lieutenant colonel slowed its progress.

One could find similar examples all across Iraq over the five years of the war. Because the American military is remarkably decentralized, and because the struggle against the insurgents was spread out across at least half of the nation's eighteen provinces, conditions in Iraq have risen and fallen over the years in accordance with the conduct of individual American officers of relatively modest rank. "This is a captains' or a colonels' war," an astute commander once told me.

For anyone relying on the mainstream media, that fact may come as news. Nor will one find an awareness of it in most of the books written about the war by members of the foreign press corps in Baghdad. Their sense of events on the ground has usually borne some relation to the attitude of that colonel in the cavalry: deep skepticism, ignorance of military strategy, superciliousness toward the difficult tasks being undertaken around them, and an overarching vanity. They are, moreover, frequently too influenced by the partisan struggle at home to provide fair and clear portraits or analysis of a wildly complicated and multi-sided conflict.

In order to offer an honest and useful explanation of why the war went as wrong as it did, and why, after five painful years, it has undergone so remarkable a turnaround, a good book about Iraq would have to explain to readers the failure of the White House, the Pentagon, the National Security Council, and the State Department to work together effectively. Such a book would also have to help readers grasp the limitations of a military that, although unbeatable in open battle and much better at urban

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warfare than anyone expected, could nevertheless not finish its task without a comprehensive change in strategy and culture that began four years after the first shots were fired.

To this end, the book that is needed would show how, when it came to distributing aid and playing local Iraqi politics, the military proved much cleverer and more efficient than either the State Department or the Agency for International Development. And yet it would also reveal how some of the most highly-praised senior officers in charge of the war were foolish, irresponsible, or wrong-headed: men like General Tommy Franks, guilty of criminal complacency in the spring of 2003 when he presumed his job as overall commander was completed after a few weeks and promptly retired from duty; Generals John Abizaid and Ricardo Sanchez, neither of whom was up to the difficult task of running the military effort in Iraq; and even the Marine generals who made the disastrous call to halt the first attempt to retake the city of Falluja from Sunni, Baathist, and al-Qaeda forces after the slaughter of four American contractors in 2004.

Above all, such a book would explain the nature of the "captains' and colonels' war." It would show how the revolutionary alteration in tactics undertaken by General David Petraeus in 2007, by seizing advantage of this great fact, brought about a vast change for the better that no one dependent on mainstream reportage would ever have imagined possible.

THE GREAT accomplishment of Bing West, whose new book, *The Strongest Tribe*,* is his third on the Iraq war, lies precisely in his demonstration of how this captains' and colonels' war came to be. West, who served as a Marine infantry officer in Vietnam and as an assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration, always connects events on the ground that he has witnessed with his own eyes to the discussions and decisions in Washington among politicians and generals. *The Strongest Tribe* is also remarkably up-to-the-minute, taking note, for example, of policy debates in Washington revealed only this past May with the publication of Douglas Feith's *War and Decision*. Finally, West displays a profound understanding of military doctrine and a wealth of experience that together make *The Strongest Tribe* an invaluable guide to the conflict.

But as a piece of writing, unfortunately, *The Strongest Tribe* is problematic. It is marred by a tendency toward repetition and an excess of anecdotes that confuse rather than elucidate the core narrative. Worse, West is uninterested in and dismissive of Iraq and Iraqis. He has no time for Iraqi politicians, even though some of them, like Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih, are extraordinarily brave and able, arguably fit heirs to our own founding fathers. He also exaggerates the parallels with the Vietnam conflict, underplays the role of the Army in favor of the Marines, has a surprising soft spot for the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group—whose recommendations would have certainly led to an outright American defeat—and an even more surprising suspicion of General David Petraeus's new manual on how to fight a counterinsurgency. Not least, he often seems unaware that there is more to the story of Iraq than can be gleaned from touring the theater with lieutenant colonels.

For these reasons, impressive though it is in many respects, *The Strongest Tribe* cannot be judged the book on Iraq we have been waiting for.

What, then, of another new book, *The Forever War*†? This memoir of a reporter's two-and-a-half years in Iraq is almost certainly the most moving, exciting, and atmospheric portrait of the war yet published. Its author, Dexter Filkins, worked there as a correspondent for the *New York Times*, and during his tenure earned a well-deserved reputation for being bolder and more hardworking than many of his colleagues in the Baghdad press corps. Filkins went out into the field when other reporters felt constrained to stay in fortified compounds or hotels, sending their Iraqi stringers to conduct interviews and gather local color for the stories they relayed to their editors and readers with the presumption that they truly grasped the nature of the conflict they were covering.

Throughout *The Forever War*, Filkins shows a kind of street smarts all too rare in much reporting from Iraq. Early on, for example, he began to notice that Iraqis had a tendency to tell foreigners what they thought the foreigners wanted to hear. This behavior—perhaps an overhang of 30 years under totalitarian rule—worked to skew American reporting on Iraq toward the negative, since most mainstream reporters arrived in the country with an already developed hostility to the Coalition effort, only to find congenial locals ready to confirm their predetermined positions.

Time and again, common sense served Filkins well. Unlike his colleagues, who were given to reporting Iraqi rumor-mongering and conspiracy theories with a straight face, Filkins kept his eyes open and his wits about him. Thus, arriving at the scene of a car bombing and standing amid neighborhood residents screaming that the car had been hit by American missiles, Filkins notices a still-smoking engine block, the signature result of a vehicle rigged to explode. Similarly, he offers unforgettable snapshots of some of the significant but underreported oddities of the war, like the way Iraqis continue to hang their laundry or to go shopping in the middle of a firefight—behavior that

* *The Strongest Tribe: War, Politics, and the Endgame in Iraq*. Random House, 448 pp., $28.00.

† Knopf, 386 pp., $25.00.



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often results in civilian casualties.

To his credit, Filkins also expresses genuine compassion for the millions of Iraqi victims of Saddam Hussein, and evinces a comprehensive grasp of the horrors of the Baathist security state that was ousted by the 2003 invasion. More than many of his colleagues, he appreciates the courage of those thousands of Iraqis who, beginning in 2003, stepped forward to build their own country and, as he writes, "went to the slaughter" at the hands of Sunni and Baathist insurgents.

AND YET, for all its virtues, *The Forever War* is also not the book we need. If anything, indeed, it is the kind of work that has made it so difficult, if not impossible, for Americans to understand the war in Iraq. In the end, it is instructive less for what it tells us about that war than for what it inadvertently reveals of the peculiar institutional biases that have left Americans less informed about this conflict than about any other in recent memory.

Some of these biases are revealed in the use of language. Filkins often refers to "the Americans" as if he were not one himself, or as if the *New York Times* was some kind of neutral nation of its own. But this stance of seeming neutrality turns out not even to be neutral. For Filkins, the Mahdi army, the militia led by the renegade Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, is made up of "guerrillas," a term that legitimizes a loose association of street gangs and private armies, while the Blackwater corporation bodyguards hired to protect American diplomats are mere "gunmen."

Filkins's language reveals bias in ways that go beyond the assignation of improper words. His prose affects a world-weary, tough-guy stance in the manner of Michael Herr's Vietnam memoir *Dispatches* (or of Herr's narration as spoken by the actor Martin Sheen in the movie *Apocalypse Now*). The combination of Hemingwayesque swagger, Hollywood cliché, and a dash of the Vietnam anti-war movement's hostile attitude toward Americans in uniform yields such nuggets as this: "The insurgency: it was everywhere and it was nowhere. The Americans brought in the heavy machinery and the storm troopers." At another point, he presumes indiscriminate murderous intent of a kind one rarely encounters among experienced combat troops: "The heat outside was astounding but the guys still went out most days, loaded with guns and gear. Into the night, into rubble. Looking to waste people."

Relating his first sight of American troops during the 2003 invasion, Filkins writes: "The Americans were pouring into the town, young and overfed and heavily armed. They were kids mostly, nineteen-year-olds from Kansas and North Dakota." As it happens, I was there during the invasion, and I did not see too many "overfed" soldiers or Marines. Arriving in Iraq after training in the desert for months, they were lean and weathered. And they were not "kids." In today's military, most soldiers and Marines in combat units are not nineteen, as they were during Vietnam when the draft was still in force. Most are men in their early to mid-twenties, and they seem a great deal more mature than students or young professionals of the same age. The word "kids," which Filkins employs all too frequently, simultaneously infantilizes, patronizes, and belittles the hundreds of thousands of Americans who have fought in the war.

Filkins makes much of the fact that he was often unfamiliar with the names of the small towns from which some young soldiers came, as if that in itself was cause for pathos. The implication here is that they were poor dumb hicks, with no other opportunity in life but the military. The truth is that three-quarters of American high-school graduates are unable to meet the intellectual and physical standards of today's armed forces. But to Filkins these soldiers must evidently be either victims or villains, sacrificial lambs or brutes—anything but highly trained and often remarkably selfless professionals.

Here is Filkins reflecting on Marine casualties:

> There wasn't any point in sentimentalizing the kids; they were trained killers after all. . . . Sometimes I envied them their patriotism and their faith, honed out there on the plains of Oswatomie. Sometimes I thought they needed to ask more questions.

ASK MORE questions, indeed. Has any nation, or military, asked itself more questions about its conduct in the midst of an ongoing conflict? The Army and Marine Corps have invested tremendous effort in preparing documents, referred to collectively as "Lessons Learned," in which they acknowledge their errors and try to devise ways of doing things better.

The military has come to see, for example, that it makes sense to preserve institutional knowledge by sending the same units back to the same places in Iraq where they know the people and the people know them. The Army in particular has had to overcome its excessive emphasis on "force protection," according to which accounting for the safety of the American fighting man is the first and most important task of a unit. On this point, senior commanders listened to their juniors, who insisted it would be safer in the long term for soldiers, and vastly more effective for the mission as a whole, if American troops were out on the streets, attuned to local events, instead of being hunkered down in heavily fortified bases far from the heart of battle.

If Filkins is aware of any of this, *The Forever War* betrays no sign of it. He clearly knows much more about Iraq and its various tribes, factions, and cultures than he does about his own country's military. This is significant, and profoundly



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so, because the military has *its* own tribes, factions, and cultures, and no writer can convey a proper sense of its conduct without being aware of them.

Thus, the culture of the Marine Corps is different from the culture of the Army, and within the Army the culture of the 82nd Airborne Division, say, is different from that of the 3rd Infantry Division. Within those divisions, there are radical discontinuities not just among different battalions and companies but between combat and support troops, between staff officers back at base and their front-line counterparts, between the mortar platoon and the scout platoon. Some of those differences are matters of leadership, and dissolve over brief periods of time; others are institutional. If all military units are the same to you, if an awareness of the details of military culture is beneath you, then you will not be able to figure out why one U.S. unit killed a great many civilians at checkpoints while another, which did the hard work of getting to know the neighborhood, received a steady stream of intelligence tips from local Iraqis.

Filkins's ignorance of military matters is compounded by his complacency about it, another attitude he shares with too many of his colleagues in the mainstream media. Beginning the superb account of his time embedded in Falluja, he writes, "the Marines were all from Kilo Company." But there are scores of companies in the Marine Corps that bear the name of Kilo Company, "Kilo" being merely the word assigned to the letter "K" in what is known as the NATO phonetic alphabet ("alpha, bravo, Charlie," and so on). The name "Kilo Company" alone, without reference to the regiment, division, or Marine expeditionary unit to which the company belongs, tells a reader nothing. It is both incomplete and discourteous, akin to reporting on an industrial dispute and not bothering to learn or state the full name either of the company involved or of the union local.

FILKINS LEFT Iraq in 2006 to take up a position at Harvard. *The Forever War*, the book that has resulted from his labors there, is composed essentially of a series of atmospheric snapshots, devoid of chronology and redolent of the days when the war was arguably at its worst. Absent from it is any sense that Iraq is a very different place today, and that a war once on the verge of being lost is now on the verge of being won.

Granted, *The Forever War* is a personal account and not a history, but there is something strange, verging on the bizarre, about a book published in 2008 that makes no attempt to reconcile the two. The Anbar Awakening of 2007, when Sunni tribal leaders decided to switch sides and join the United States in fighting the al-Qaeda terrorists who had come into their province and turned it into a hell on earth, is the subject, literally, of a lone footnote. Neither the "surge" nor the massive decline in both American and Iraqi deaths even merits a mention in the book's epilogue. It is as if Filkins and his publisher were worried that the overall impression created by *The Forever War*—Iraq as a hopeless and ever-worsening mess—might be undermined by hints of American success.

Something else about *The Forever War* is both suggestive and objectionable—namely, the undertone of self-congratulation that hums in almost every paragraph. Filkins wants his readers to know that he is a badass, a wild and crazy guy, a dude. He likes to write about "heavy shit" going down. Again and again he reminds us that in his devil-may-care adventurism he took five-mile evening runs. "It was madness," he preens. "I was courting death or at least a kidnapping." In one episode, he recounts how he and his friend, the *New Yorker* correspondent George Packer, mocked some Chilean security contractors guarding the Green Zone by boasting to them: "We live out in the Red Zone." Later, without a trace of self-awareness, he offhandedly speaks the essential truth: "If I were kidnapped, the whole American army would be dispatched to look for me."

Standing in stark contrast to Filkins's periodic smugness and solipsism are the service orientation and self-sacrifice of the fighting forces he has made so little effort to comprehend. In an episode that served as the high point of a recent *New York Times Magazine* excerpt from this book, Filkins tells the story of a young Marine who was killed helping him and his photographer set up a picture of a dead insurgent. It is a terrible story, the kind of thing that would prompt another reporter to wonder about the validity of his profession and the meaning of his life. The photographer, in Filkins's telling, is indeed wracked with guilt and self-loathing for having fatally implicated the Marine in a foolhardy venture. Not Filkins. His only emotional response comes later in the book when he meets the dead Marine's parents, fearing their anger. When they fail to display any, thereby frustrating his expectations, he insultingly concludes that they are living in denial. Poor dumb hicks.

I finished *The Forever War* wondering how it is that heavily armed "kids" in the midst of a war zone can often seem so much more humane, mature, and compassionate than the highly educated star journalists who have made their reputations reporting from Iraq. Indeed, if the ideal book on this war has yet to be written, it is more likely to emerge from the experience of one of those "kids" than from journalists encrusted with the reflexive notions of the enclaves in which they burrow, as heavily defended from views that might challenge them as were American fighting forces in the "superbases" from which they had to emerge before the war in Iraq could be won.



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OBSERVATIONS

# Art, Artlessness, and Hollywood

*Terry Teachout*

AS WITH all old media, the movie business is in decline. This is partly because of the fast-growing popularity of competing new-media "platforms" like online entertainment and video games, and partly because the disintegration of America's common culture has led to the shrinking of the market for the big-budget, mass-audience films that have always been Hollywood's stock in trade. The decline may not be as steep as in the music business, but it is worrisome enough—and it is exacerbated by something less tangible than receipts. This is the growing feeling that American filmmakers have lost their collective touch: that they are no longer *capable* of making movies that large numbers of adults want to see.

To be sure, the fact that today's big-budget films are radically different in character from those of the not-so-distant past does not necessarily make them inferior. And while it is true that a considerable number of critics (myself among them) believe that the American film industry has lost its way, many seem to be motivated less by the critical spirit than by simple nostalgia for the 70's, the decade when Hollywood was turning out such films as Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972), Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), Sidney Lumet's *Network* (1976), and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976). Memorable as these movies were, however, I cannot help noting that the 70's also brought us *Airport*, *The Exorcist*, *Saturday Night Fever*, and countless other successful films of similarly ephemeral interest.

David Thomson, who was born in 1941, makes no secret of his own mounting disillusion with Hollywood in *"Have You Seen. . . ?": A Personal Introduction to 1,000 Films*, a hefty volume of one-page essays about 1,000 culturally significant films of widely varied merit made between 1895 and 2007.* As Thomson writes in the book's introduction:

> Films are not what they were. Far fewer of us go to see them. . . . [M]any films today are merciless and mercenary, and increasingly they are not even photographed. Story, character, and the innate beauty of the medium are being sacrificed.

Thomson, too, is a believer in the enduring importance of the best American films of the 70's. But it is the Hollywood of an earlier time, the "golden age" of the 30's, 40's, and 50's, to which he remains most stubbornly loyal, and he readily admits that his distaste for today's "shallow amusement" is in part a function of his increasing age: "This book may come off as helplessly nostalgic—a tribute to an age that is not coming back." In Thomson's case, indeed, the nostalgia amounts to an obsession with the lost cinematic world of his youth—a world that, beyond a certain point, exists mainly in his imagination.

FOR ALL its retrospective yearning, *"Have You Seen. . . ?"* is extraordinarily rich and readable, one of the most intelligent books about film to

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* Knopf, 1,024 pp., $39.95.



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be published in recent years. Conceived as a companion volume to Thomson's *A Biographical Dictionary of Film* (1975, rev. 2002), it is superior to any other compilation of short film reviews and, in particular, vastly more penetrating than Pauline Kael's *5,001 Nights at the Movies* (1982, rev. 1991).

Much of the book's strength arises from the fact that its format plays so well to Thomson's strengths. A witty and allusive essayist whose full-length books on film and its makers are full of good things but often too episodic to be wholly satisfying, he is at his best when being brief, a master of concision who never writes a paragraph when a sentence will do. A case in point is his brutal dismissal of Mike Nichols's *The Graduate* (1967): "I think it's a cold, heartless entertainment, never more ruthless than when dumping charm on us."

Like all good critics, Thomson writes about the work before him, not the one in his head, and he never makes the mistake of taking an artist's reputation for granted, even one whom he admires. He is squarely on the mark, for instance, in observing of Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1956) that "if you're a good deal younger than the film, then its intellectual showmanship is very impressive." No less characteristically clear-eyed is his blunt summing-up of Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977): "The whole thing is very hip, very American New Wave, and disastrously empty."

At the same time, Thomson is also an eloquent advocate for the films he loves best, and when he writes about one of them, as in the case of *La Grande Illusion* (1937), Jean Renoir's great antiwar movie, he makes every word count:

> How does one film of only reasonable length, often so casual and easygoing, have so many nuances and so many large statements (including its title) without ever seeming portentous? . . . *La Grande Illusion* is simply there, candid, cheerful, sad, alert.

When it comes to American film, finally, Thomson shrewdly recognizes that Hollywood is "most entertaining (and most serious) when making comedies." Indeed, his belief in the underlying seriousness of the best golden-age comedies is so thoroughgoing that he claims in "*Have You Seen. . . ?*" to have "reached a time in life when I'd rather have a great screwball comedy than a profound tragedy. After all, tragedy is all around us and screwball is something only the movies can do."

Thomson's perspective on American movies is embodied in his conviction that Howard Hawks was Hollywood's best director. At various times in his career, Hawks specialized in frenetic screwball comedies like *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) and *His Girl Friday* (1940), lighthearted adventure stories like *To Have and Have Not* (1944), and large-scale Westerns like *Red River* (1948) and *Rio Bravo* (1959). "The only difference between comedy and tragedy is the point of view," Hawks once remarked; precisely because his own point of view was essentially comic, he was for many years underrated by those who believe that comedy is inherently less serious than tragedy. Hence Thomson's corrective, at times hyperbolic praise of Hawks, whom he actually goes so far as to compare with Bonnard as a painter and Dickens as a novelist.

IT IS a tribute to Thomson's critical sense that his politics so rarely influence his judgments. This may seem surprising at first glance, since Thomson, a British émigré now living in San Francisco, is a devout unbeliever in American virtue who wears his left-wing views on his sleeve. But these never lead him to call a good movie bad, or vice-versa. Nor is mere high-mindedness enough to lull his vigilance, as can be seen in his sharp-tongued comment on *Reds* (1981), Warren Beatty's slick hymn to the unrealized promise of American Communism: "This film is not directed; it is assembled like a souvenir issue of *Vanity Fair*—on the Red Look."

In another way, though, Thomson is the most political of critics, for he believes just as devoutly in the culture-shaping potential of commercial film. In the revised edition of his *Biographical Dictionary of Film*, he even argued that "the movie in America has some duty to be large, embracing (and uniting)," and lamented the loss of the promise inherent in that duty:

> Do we face a time when movies resemble theater or the novel? Must we give up the hope of films that reach "everyone"? Can great filmmakers still redeem the hope? Or was it, simply, an historical curiosity that for a few decades (or a few movies) the hope was alive?

What most disturbs him about the movie business today is that while some films do succeed in appealing to a mass audience, they are almost without exception adolescent extravaganzas driven not by story and character but by the computer-generated special effects that are their *raison d'être*. This tendency, he argues, dates from the success of Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975), a flawlessly crafted, expressively hollow thriller that "means nothing at all. . . . It is zero to the power of ten."

For Thomson, the hugely profitable *Jaws* and George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977), taken together, constitute "the line in the sand, the disastrous event" after which American filmmakers stopped aspiring to "profound entertainment" and instead concentrated on making "lightweight, silly, fun" films that were nothing more than "gestures trying to grab the interest of kids set on war games and PlayStations. . . . The young demographic was in charge. And the bright days of the early 1970's were shutting down."



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THOMSON'S VIEW of Hollywood today is basically correct. But was Hollywood in its golden age really an Arcadian paradise of democratic art? Not at all—and he himself knows better.

When Thomson suggests that screwball comedy is something "only the movies can do," he begs the question: what else can commercial movies do? To judge by the films he praises in "*Have You Seen. . . ?*" and elsewhere, it would seem that, comedies aside, the best films to come out of golden-age Hollywood were quasi-operatic melodramas like Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), along with the musicals, Westerns, and *film-noir* thrillers whose directors—foremost among them Hawks, Vincente Minnelli, Jacques Tourneur, and Raoul Walsh—worked with such inspired craft as to elevate them to the status of art.

What Hollywood has almost never done well is what might be termed domestic realism. The poet Philip Larkin famously declared himself to be a fan of "ordinary sane novels about ordinary sane people doing ordinary sane things." As he explained:

> I like to read about people who have done nothing spectacular, who aren't beautiful and lucky, who try to behave well in the limited field of activity they command, but who can see, in the little autumnal moments of vision, that the so-called "big" experiences of life are going to miss them; and I like to read about such things presented not with self-pity or despair or romanticism, but with realistic firmness and even humor.

Thomson has the same qualities in mind when, in writing about William Wyler's *Dodsworth* (1936), he speaks of its having "the very unusual feeling of a picture about grown-ups." One of the most useful things about "*Have You Seen. . . ?*" is the way in which it shows how America's commercial filmmakers have never been good at such modest, unsentimental pictures, which to this day are far more likely to be made in Europe.

Nor do our directors often rise to the greater challenge of portraying the complexity of human motivation with the poetic lyricism and dramatic intensity that one associates with the plays of Shakespeare. A handful of postwar genre films—they include John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), *The Godfather*, and *Chinatown*—have aspired in their more limited way to this kind of high seriousness. But it is not, to put it mildly, characteristic of Hollywood.

THE TRUTH is that Hollywood has *always* been hostile to the creation of serious art—a truth that most postmodern film criticism has labored to obscure.* Here, for example, is Manohla Dargis reviewing *The Dark Knight*, the latest Batman film, in the *New York Times*: "Pitched at the divide between art and industry, poetry and entertainment, [*The Dark Knight*] goes darker and deeper than any Hollywood movie of its comic-book kind." In such pronouncements one feels nothing so much as a near-desperate will to believe that there is more to today's commercial movies than meets the eye.

David Thomson does not make this mistake in writing about Hollywood today. But when he speaks in "*Have You Seen. . . ?*" of "the attempt to see an art in the movies as well as entertainment, a culture as much as a business," he betrays his own wishful thinking about golden-age Hollywood. It is the same wishful thinking that surfaces at the end of his essay on Hitchcock's *Vertigo*:

> If you are moved by this film, you are a creature of cinema. But if you are alarmed by its implausibility, its hysteria, its cruelty—well, there are novels.

I see his point: a film like *Vertigo* is in a sense a poem, or the cinematic equivalent of lyric theater, and thus ought not to be judged by the same standards of plausibility that one might apply to a novel by Trollope or a play by Ibsen. But how does *Vertigo*, remarkable though it is, measure up to, say, *The Tempest* or *Tristan und Isolde*—or, for that matter, Jean Renoir's profoundly poetic *The Rules of the Game* (1939), which Thomson rightly refers to as "the greatest film by the greatest director"? Can *Vertigo* truly be said to be "great" in the same way as these landmarks of Western art?

No more, surely, than a masterly entertainment like Howard Hawks's *To Have and Have Not* can be properly compared to a novel like Dickens's *Great Expectations* or a painting like Bonnard's *The Open Window*. Yes, *To Have and Have Not* is wonderful in its own way; but it is not the same way, and it does no one, least of all its maker, a favor to claim otherwise.

Thomson's enthusiasm for Hawks is, of course, the defect of a virtue—namely, his awareness that American filmmakers have almost always been at their best when seeking to entertain rather than to enlighten. In the introduction to "*Have You Seen. . . ?*", he hints at the harsher implications of this fact:

> [D]on't rule out the possibility that the movies are most fit for kids. Sometimes we stretch our youth unreasonably far—and I think there is an interesting book in how far film people (battling being grown up) are especially prey to that sentimentality.

For the most part, though, Thomson remains an increasingly weary but nonetheless true believer in the promise of American film:

> It is a marvel to see that things written 400 years ago are still read or attended to. Will films stand up that long, or are they more perishable? Maybe in the

* On this point, see my "Why Hollywood Cannot Make Art," COMMENTARY, January 2007.



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best of our young generation it can be seen and felt that *Citizen Kane* is as good or as worthy or as much fun as *The Great Gatsby*, a Frank Lloyd Wright house, an Edward Hopper window, or Louis Armstrong doing "Potato Head Blues."

Perhaps. But just as jazz, in the formulation of the British critic Benny Green, might be called a "reluctant art," so are most American filmmakers sentimentalists who are reluctant to commit themselves to the kind of fundamental seriousness of mind that is taken for granted in the older arts. It says much about their own reluctant art that so few films made in Hollywood in the 20th century were as deeply serious in expressive purpose as Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941)—or that the brief flowering of Hollywood productions in the early 70's gave way less than a decade later to the chronic juvenility that dominates American film today.



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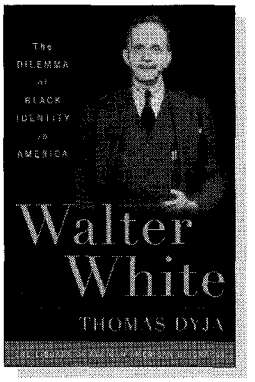


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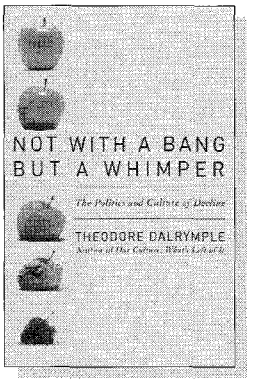


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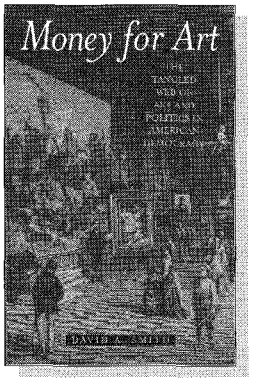


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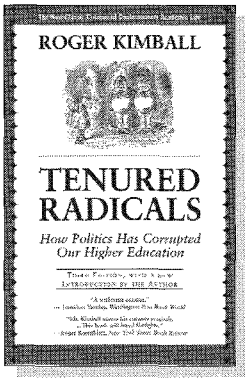


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# Books in Review

## Downloading & Freeloading

Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy

by Lawrence Lessig

*Penguin. 352 pp. $25.95*

Reviewed by
L. Gordon Crovitz

IT IS not easy having a calm conversation about media these days. The powerfully disruptive forces of technology are remaking the landscape, producing enormous winners and once-mighty losers, with the full impact on the culture, for good or for ill, yet to be determined. Consider that the largest media company in the world—Google—does not produce content; Google's revenues are from advertising, and yet, in a marker of the times, its home is not on Madison Avenue but in Silicon Valley. Meanwhile, the recorded-music industry has been suing its fans for making digital copies of songs, even as the industry itself has yet to find a business model that works. Then there is the movie industry, which fears being next as it becomes widely possible to download massive streams of video. Television broadcasters, for their part, are not sure whether the web is friend or foe.

What with all this creative destruction in the air (to borrow the apt phrase of the great economist Joseph Schumpeter), it is understandable that executives of traditional media companies have had little time for a sharp critique of what they regard as their most fundamental property right—their right, that is, to the intellectual content of their music, films, and video. Yet this right itself, protected under the traditional laws of copyright, is very much under siege. The most potent bombs have been thrown by Lawrence Lessig, a law professor, litigator, and author.

In previous books, Lessig has criticized Congress for extending the term of copyright protections from the original fourteen years, renewable for another fourteen, to today's life-of-the-artist plus 70 years. In *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*, he undertakes to show how, in light of today's digital technology and its empowerment of consumers, the current copyright regime no longer makes sense at all.

HISTORICALLY, in Lessig's reconstruction, we have moved as a culture from a "Read/Only" era, characterized by one-way creativity from artist to consumer—with the latter enabled only to listen to a recording or watch a film—to today's "Read/Write" era in which a listener or viewer can not only listen and watch but copy and share—and often, in the process, create new versions of the artist's work. These creations are what Lessig calls "remixes." As an instance, he offers the story of a mother who videotaped her eighteen-month-old son dancing to the beat of a song, "Let's Go Crazy," by the pop star Prince. She then posted about 30 seconds of the resulting footage on the video-sharing website YouTube so that amused relatives (and anyone else in the world) could watch.

Current law largely prohibits

L. GORDON CROVITZ, *the former publisher of the* Wall Street Journal, *writes the "Information Age" column for the* Journal *and advises digital media and technology companies.*



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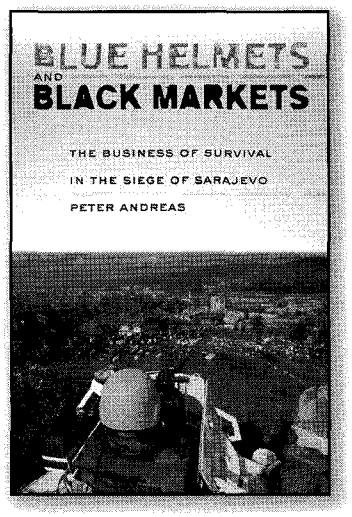


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such activity. And so, lawyers for Universal Music, fearing that they would be giving up a mile if they failed to stop an inch, threatened the mother with copyright infringement and a $150,000 fine. Their argument rested on the proposition that her use of Prince's wholly owned property detracted from its monetary value.

Yet in many if not most cases, Lessig argues, such remixes in fact *add* financial value to the content owner by promoting his work and creating deeper engagement with consumers: just imagine the benefits that could accrue from being endorsed on YouTube by a jolly toddler. For him, then, the question boils down to one of permitting people to make use of music and videos for such incidental purposes while still protecting the valid economic rights of artists and the companies that represent them.

Unlike some Internet activists, Lessig would not abolish copyright outright. He does, though, make a strong case for doing away with the winner-takes-all rigidities of the current regime. In this connection, he usefully points out that it has long been permissible to quote from books or articles for the purposes of reviewing and similar activities. Over the decades, a reasonably clear "fair-use" exception has been built into the law. But why should I be allowed to quote passages from Lessig's book in COMMENTARY while young people (many preferring newer media to text) are blocked from remixing, or quoting from, television, film, and music?

More broadly, Lessig asks, "What does it mean to a society when a whole generation is raised as criminals?" For the plain fact is that tens of millions of songs have been downloaded, especially by young people, without payment. Their behavior is against the law, but enforcing the law has proved impossible. In the meantime, record companies, even as they have tried to limit this activity (since they cannot stop it), are themselves eagerly looking for ways to take advantage of current technology by using the web to market their songs and to identify new talent deserving of traditional recording contracts.

WHAT WOULD a new accommodation between content owners and consumers look like? Lessig acknowledges that he does not have a full answer to this question. Although he describes himself as a "typical liberal law professor," he takes economics seriously and is alive to market considerations. The problem, for him, is that traditional copyright law is quite dead to those same considerations, having still not absorbed the fact that much innovation these days no longer follows the templates of customary business practice.

The Internet itself, after all, was built largely on the free labor of many anonymous programmers, just as the open-source software industry has been built by programmers who voluntarily add to existing code, usually for no personal gain, with only some rights ever being claimed or exploited for profit. Linux software, for example, was largely developed by volunteers, often with the encouragement of their day-time employers who found ways to use the product. Lessig predicts much more of this sort of combination of part-open and part-protected innovation as companies look for ways to combine their own efforts with those of their consumers.

Economically all this may sound counterintuitive, but Lessig is correct in suggesting that it is how capitalism has worked during times of great shifts. In the Industrial Age, inventors freely shared designs for high-pressure engines and furnaces to process ore into iron, expecting that others would improve on these techniques to help build new industries. As Lessig writes, "innovators reveal not as an act of charity, but as a strategy to better returns."

Lessig is also right to characterize copyright as a monopoly power,



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conferred and enforced by government. Sounding at times less like a liberal law professor than like an anti-big-government conservative, he insists that what we need most at this moment is "more humility about regulation":

> For most of the history of modern government, the struggle was not about what was good or bad; the struggle was about whether it was possible to imagine government effecting any good through regulation. . . . Recognizing the uselessness of certain kinds of rules led governments "to avoid regulation in obvious areas, or to deregulate when they saw their regulation failing. These are expressions of regulatory humility, a habit of mind for most of human history. We've forgotten these limits of humility. Wherever there is a wrong, the first instinct of our government is to send in the legal equivalent of the Marines.

In the spirit of constructive reform, Lessig offers several concrete proposals. Thus, he would exempt non-commercial use altogether: the eighteen-month-old could go back to dancing to Prince on YouTube. He would also restore the earlier copyright process that required holders to re-register their works periodically; this would circumvent such common problems as books going out of print but still being unavailable because of long-term copyright protection. Most ambitiously, he would redefine the concept of copyright protection itself, applying it to the *use* of content rather than simply to the act of copying. (This would protect the commercially exploitable uses an owner had in mind while, for example, permitting a new technology to be built on an old one.) And he would decriminalize file sharing, legislating instead a tax or royalty arrangement to compensate owners.

An activist as well as an academic, Lessig has actually devised a way of helping people opt out of the government copyright regime altogether. In 2001, as he mentions in passing in this book, he founded the Creative Commons, a licensing system now used by millions of individuals who wish to reserve only partial rights for their writing, photos, blogs, and other works. Most licenses under this approach restrict commercial use but permit non-commercial use and also permit derivative products to be created (often on the condition that these, too, will be freely available). While such contractual arrangements may not work for some media—the makers of a blockbuster Hollywood film understandably want much tighter control—Lessig's innovation has encouraged the emergence of exactly the kind of hybrid business model that the music and movie industries desperately need.

It is unfortunate that a book like this one is destined to be read mostly by people who are already deeply engaged in the details of technology, law, and their intersection—geeks, congressional staffers, music executives, and the like. To some extent, indeed, it suffers from the defects of all such books, including repetitiousness, occasional pedantry, and a certain air of inside-dopesterism. But in truth the debate over the proper scope of copyright is as broad as the debate over civil liberties in general.

Private property is a core individual right—and is key to a smoothly functioning economy. Our digital age has made it easy to share, quote, and combine private intellectual property in unprecedented and unpredictable ways. In such an age, surely the best approach for government regulation is, within obvious limits, to leave people free to find new methods of operating that will

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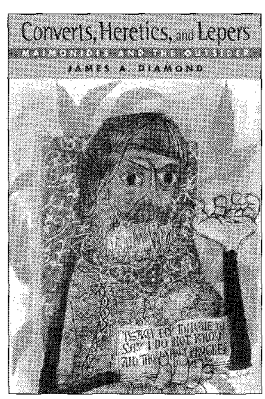


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simultaneously protect and, ideally, enhance their legitimate economic rights. At a minimum this means that, as Lessig concludes, "We all must be less optimistic about the potential of government to do good."

## The Adventurer

Benjamin Disraeli

by Adam Kirsch

*Schocken. 288 pp. $21.00.*

Reviewed by
John Gross

Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881) was a Christian. His marriage took place in a church. So did his funeral. He had been baptized as a boy of twelve. Had he not been, he would never have been able to pursue the political career that brought him world fame, since, until 1858, new members entering the British House of Commons were required to take their oath "on the true faith of a Christian."

Nor was there much in Disraeli's political career that reflected his Jewish origins, certainly not in an obvious or explicit fashion. It is true that he consistently supported the admission of Jewish MPs to Parliament, but this was the exception. On other Jewish issues, such as the Damascus blood libel of 1840, which created an international outcry, he remained silent. Robert Blake's classic modern biography (1968), which concentrates on his politics, runs to over 800 pages. It devotes only a dozen of them to Jewishness and Judaism.

Yet it makes perfect sense for a book about Disraeli to appear, as Adam Kirsch's does, in a series called "Jewish Encounters." He was born a Jew, and his Jewishness was central to his personality if not to his politics. We don't have to guess at the fact; he makes it clear in his writings. It was also something of which everyone was constantly aware. At the Congress of Berlin in 1878, Bismarck, who admired him, famously referred to him as "*der alte Jude*." By this stage he had been ennobled, and had changed his emblematically Jewish name. He was now Lord Beaconsfield. But that fooled no one. In Berlin, humorists took to calling him "B.A. Kohnfeldt."

KIRSCH'S ADMIRABLE study is a portrait rather than a monograph. Concentrating on Disraeli's Jewish aspects, it also sets them in the context of his career as a whole. The reader is left in no doubt that, whatever existential questions may have haunted Disraeli, most of his working hours were devoted to the hard details of everyday politics and party maneuvering. Complex issues are sketched in: the struggle over the repeal of the protectionist Corn Laws, the extension of the suffrage in the Second Reform Act, the diplomacy of the Eastern Question in the 1870's. The necessary political information is woven neatly and painlessly into Kirsch's narrative—but then, as befits an author who is a poet and the book critic of the *New York Sun*, the whole work is conspicuous for its literary skill.

Above all, *Benjamin Disraeli* is infused with the sense of drama that its subject matter demands. For the story is one that seems no less remarkable for having been told many times before. That a Jew, born in the early years of the 19th century, should have become prime minister of what was then the most powerful state in the world; that he should have done so as leader of the conservative interest; that he should have begun his career, moreover, as a raffish adventurer—it sounds like the stuff of romantic fiction.

There was never anything half-hearted about Disraeli's ambition. At the age of nineteen, he gave up studying law. Like the autobiographical hero of his first novel, *Vivian Grey* (1826), he could visualize enjoying "the most brilliant success" at the bar, but it was not enough for him: "to be a great lawyer, I must give up my chance of being a great man."

Plainly he could never have succeeded in translating his power fantasies into reality if he had not been exceptionally intelligent and a notably gifted writer and orator. But he owed at least as much to his nerve, and to his spirit of defiance. He was reckless in his handling of money, bold in his approach to women, and undeterred (except for a period in his twenties when he suffered a breakdown) by insults and setbacks. If he was doomed to be an outsider, then he would go the whole way and turn himself into a positive exotic—wearing flamboyant clothes, striking Byronic poses.

He did not initially draw attention to his Jewish background. He didn't have to; he would have been regarded as a Jew under any circumstances. But his colorful conduct served to underline the fact: he was thought of as a flashy Jew, not as a quiet and more or less acceptable one.

Here he stood in marked contrast to his father. Isaac D'Israeli was a respectable citizen and respected author, much admired for his *Curiosities of Literature* and many similar books. He was the first Jew who sought to win salvation through writing about English literature—a distant ancestor, you might say, of Lionel Trilling. He moved at ease in literary society, and even received an honorary degree from Oxford, that bastion of Tory and Anglican orthodoxy. As for his own religious affiliation, if he had lived in Germany he might well have found a home in the ranks of Reform Judaism. But no English equivalent was available at the time.

There were many different strands in the relationship between

JOHN GROSS *is the editor most recently of* The New Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes, *available this month in paperback.*



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father and son. Isaac bequeathed to Benjamin both his underlying political assumptions (he was a Tory) and a strong vein of 18th-century skepticism. But Benjamin's sense of Jewish identity, when it surfaced, was very different from the older man's, and far more aggressive.

In his early novel *Alroy* (1833), he portrays a medieval Jewish superman who rages against the degradation of the Jews and restores the national honor by establishing a new empire in the Middle East. In his far more mature political trilogy of the 1840's, consisting of *Sybil*, *Coningsby*, and *Tancred*, the setting is contemporary industrialized England, but we again encounter a mythic Jewish hero. This time it is the mysterious Sidonia, who is wise, ironic, cosmopolitan, fabulously rich, endlessly well-connected. As somebody in the novel says, Sidonia "seems to know everyone as well as everything." At the same time, he is prevented by his Jewishness from playing a direct part in political life. His influence is immense, but he has to exercise it behind the scenes.

Sidonia does not only exemplify the gospel of Jewish supremacy; he proclaims it, seeing Jewish influence at work everywhere, among czarist diplomats no less than among German revolutionaries. He assures us that "the first Jesuits were Jews," and, with a reckless disregard for facts, identifies famous people—Mozart, for instance—as Jewish. To make matters worse, he sets out his view of the world in uncompromisingly pseudo-biological terms. "Race is everything," he declares, "there is no other truth. And every race must fall which casually suffers its blood to become mixed."

Kirsch naturally recoils from this stuff, as an enlightened reader must. From today's perspective, he writes, Sidonia looks like nothing so much as an uncanny distillation of anti-Semitic slander and paranoia, and he shows us how easy it was for an early forerunner of the Nazis like

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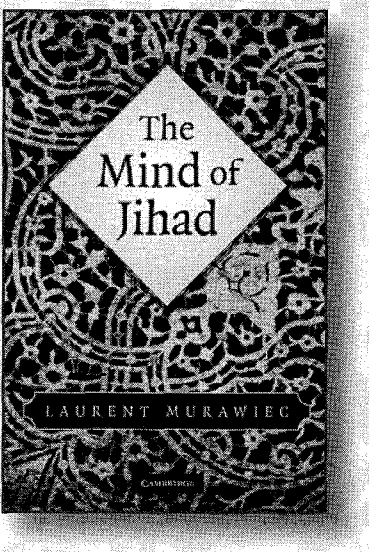


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Houston Stewart Chamberlain to cite *Coningsby* and *Tancred* with approval.

Even at the time Disraeli was writing, his ideas were liable to cause offense. In retrospect, it seems surprising that they did not cause more. In part this may simply be because they were not taken very seriously, in contrast to the more interesting sections of the novels dealing with the condition of England. Still, many non-Jews (and no doubt some Jews as well) were annoyed. "My Gentile nature kicks most resolutely against any assumption of superiority in the Jews"—such was the reaction of the young George Eliot, writing about Disraeli's trilogy in 1848; no doubt other readers would have expressed themselves even more strongly.


**William Maxwell**

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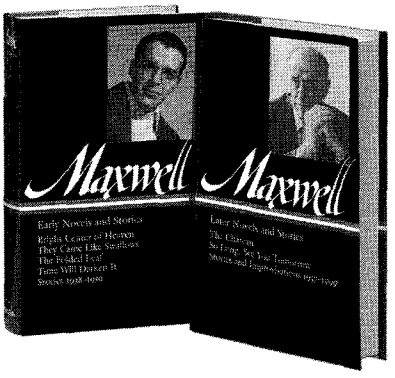


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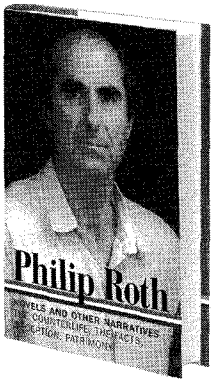


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A certain amount can be urged in mitigation. Disraeli was far from unique: he lived at a time when ideas about race that would now be impermissible were commonplace. His primary aim was benign—to speak up on behalf of a group that had suffered long centuries of prejudice and oppression. And at least there can be no doubting his sincerity. As a politician, he had nothing to gain and much to lose by harping on the unique qualities of the Jews. He wrote out of conviction.

As for the source of his belief, one can only guess. But Kirsch's explanation seems to me by far the most likely one. There was little in Disraeli's immediate family background, or in his father's example, to make him feel as vehemently as he did. His first exposure to truly hurtful anti-Semitism took place, as several episodes in his early novels hint, in the school playground, that often far from playful place. It was there that his pride received its deepest challenge, there that he received blows he never forgot and made resolutions from which he never wavered.

This can make his Jewishness sound like a purely private affair, and that indeed is what it sometimes feels like. But there is another element. *Alroy* may be rather trashy, but it has one sure claim to fame: as Kirsch says, it brings into the open, for the first time in modern literature, the dream of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The same dream also figures in the political trilogy—intermittently and incoherently, mixed up with home-made theology and Disraeli's own brand of orientalism, but still discernible.

Kirsch rightly draws attention to one episode in particular: an account in *Tancred* of the festival of Sukkot being celebrated in a poor home in London. It is a powerful evocation of Jewish continuity. In its most visionary moment, we are told that

> the vineyards of Israel have ceased to exist, but the eternal



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> law enjoins the children of Israel still to celebrate the vintage. A race that persist in celebrating their vintage, though they have no fruits to gather, will regain their vineyards.

Curiously, Kirsch omits these particular sentences, but he quotes enough from the passage to show that it points forward, not perhaps to Zionism itself, but to the kind of feelings from which Zionism might spring.

There is nothing else quite like this in Disraeli's work, and there was certainly no follow-up. Within a year or so of *Tancred*'s publication, he had become leader of the Conservatives in the House of Commons. His life was now swallowed up by British politics. In 1876, the year in which George Eliot published her Zionist novel *Daniel Deronda*, he was prime minister, busy purchasing shares in the Suez Canal (with the help of the Rothschilds) and arranging for Queen Victoria to be made Empress of India. *Daniel Deronda* has a recognized place in the pre-history of the state of Israel. All that remain of his own writings on a Jewish homeland are a few brilliant intuitions.

The one Jewish issue that he could not escape was anti-Semitism. It dogged him to the last. In the 1870's, when he was determined to prop up the Ottoman empire against the advancing power of Russia, it was widely assumed (quite wrongly) that he was motivated by "crypto-Judaism," including resentment at the czarist regime's mistreatment of its Jewish subjects. He incurred a great deal of abuse as a result. But politically he had his way.

His career was an exemplar of many things—of new possibilities for Jews, and the new complications thereby added to the notion of Jewish identity; of worldly calculation and romantic daring; of an attachment to the idea of aristocracy worthy of Proust (both men were grandsons of Jewish stockbrokers, inci-


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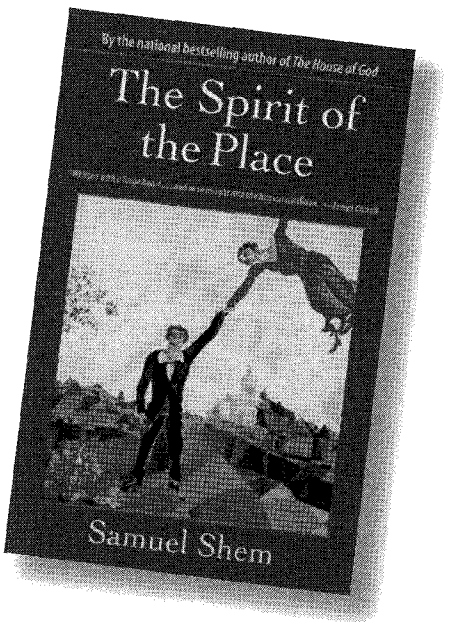


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dentally), and of a conservatism that learned to adjust to mass democracy; of both the tenacity of prejudice and the prospect of its decline.

Disraeli retains far more interest than most bygone politicians, and it is a pity that Kirsch did not have space to deal with his posthumous legacy, or his popular legend. But it would be unreasonable to expect more of a book that already packs in so much.

## Those Perfidious CEO's

The Predator State:
How Conservatives
Abandoned the Free Market
and Why Liberals Should Too

by James K. Galbraith

*Free Press. 240 pp. $25.00*

Reviewed by
Cheryl Strauss Einhorn

IN *The Affluent Society* (1958), a biting critique of America's postwar economic boom, the late John Kenneth Galbraith maintained that the ease and comfort of one class had been gained at the expense of everybody else. The book, which spent a year on the *New York Times* best-seller list, is still required reading in many high-school and college classrooms. One of its most caustic and frequently quoted passages imagines a prototypically affluent American family "out for a tour" in their "mauve and cerise, air-conditioned, power-steered, and power-braked automobile." The car, in Galbraith's nightmare vision,

> passes through cities that are badly paved, made hideous by litter, blighted buildings, billboards, and posts for wires that should long since have been put underground. . . . [The travelers] picnic on exquisitely packaged food from a portable icebox by a polluted stream and go on to spend the night at a park, which is a menace to public health and morals. Just before dozing off on an air mattress, beneath a nylon tent, amid the stench of decaying refuse, they may reflect on the curious unevenness of their blessings. Is this, indeed, the American genius?

A similarly loaded question informs this new book by Galbraith's son, who holds the Lloyd M. Bentsen, Jr. chair in government/business relations at the University of Texas. Not only does the younger Galbraith agree with his father about the enduring curse of American inequality, but, for him, the rapacity of the wealthy has now extended to the point where not just our "society" (as in the elder Galbraith's title) but the "state" itself has fallen victim to their predatory machinations.

How so? It seems that, once upon a time, we at least enjoyed a de-facto alliance among business, government, and labor: large corporations accepted and benefited from federal regulation and from tax rates that supported a growing social safety net, while unions worked with business to achieve higher wages and benefits in return for their support of the existing corporate structure. So, at least, the elder Galbraith argued in another famous book, *The New Industrial State* (1969). But now, according to Galbraith *fils*, that minimally protective arrangement no longer exists, having been torn down by the wave of deregulation that began in the 1980's and that, "from the savings-and-loan debacle to the subprime mortgage fiasco," has abetted "the systematic abuse of public institutions for private profit, or equivalently the systematic undermining of public protections for the benefit of private clients."

Conservatives are to blame. Coming to power under Ronald Reagan, they began slashing taxes and government services, ostensibly with the aim of unleashing the wealth-spreading powers of the free market. But, writes Galbraith, unfettered free markets do not impose the discipline necessary for ordered growth, nor do they create a level playing field. Nor, for that matter, are they really free. What with federal and state programs accounting for 40 percent of the total consumption of goods and services in America, we have the worst of both worlds: the market is subsidized by government but, disastrously, no longer regulated by it. Thus the way has been opened to "darker forces: sharp practice, price manipulation, and fraud."

GALBRAITH DEVOTES the second part of his book to describing exactly how the economy and the political system were taken over by rich capitalists—that is, by the chief executive officers of large corporations. Having figured out how to tap the capital markets, these CEO's succeeded in divorcing their own interests and those of their class from the interests of the companies they worked for. The "cult of shareholder valuation, the escalation of CEO pay, and the decision to link that pay to the stock market rather than [to] corporate cash flow" created, in Galbraith's judgment, an "entirely different class orientation." No longer company men, top executives owed their allegiance only to the tiny circle of their fellow CEO's.

The effects were twofold. In executive recruitment, a process that used to entail a methodical search for the most highly skilled personnel and ensured a constant infusion of fresh talent, the new credential "became, to an increasing degree, that of having been [a CEO] somewhere else"—the equivalent of a game of musical chairs among al-

CHERYL STRAUSS EINHORN, *a new contributor, worked for ten years as an editor and columnist at* Barron's. *She is now teaching at Columbia University's graduate school of journalism.*



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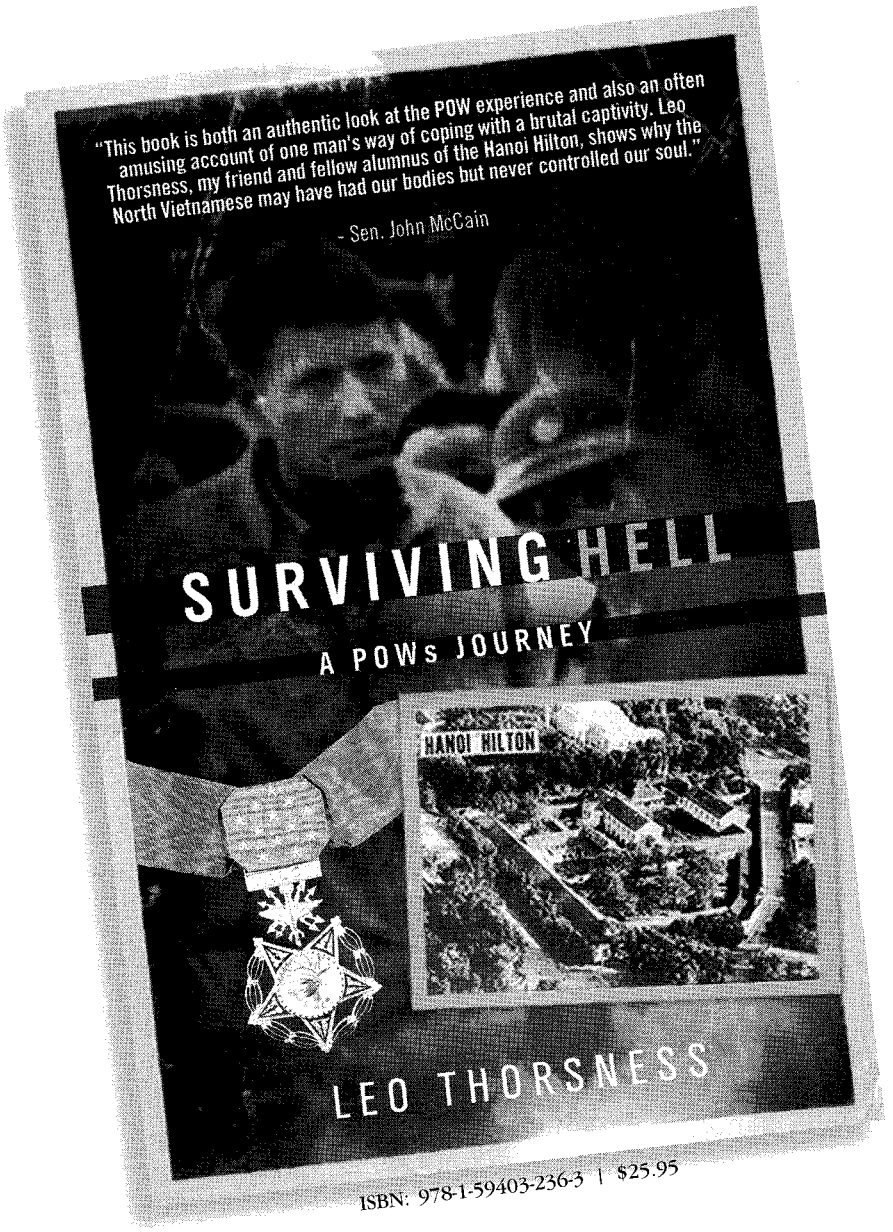
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ready seated cronies. The next step was easily foreseeable. Given the "complete incapacity of the financial markets to oversee from the outside the inner workings of a complex financial structure" like the modern corporation, "the incentive and capacity to loot the enterprise for personal gain [became] practically irresistible. What was irresistible was not resisted."

Can anything rein in the predatory CEO's who now run things for the benefit of themselves and their friends? Galbraith oscillates between extreme pessimism and a glimmer of hope.

The pessimism is rooted in the conviction conveyed in Galbraith's title: namely that, "endowed with vast wealth and freed from the corporation," the predatory class of American CEO's aims at taking over the levers of government itself, a machine they intend to run "not for any ideological project, but simply in the way that [will] bring to them . . . the most money, the least disturbed power, and the greatest chance of rescue should something go wrong." As evidence of this intention, Galbraith cites attempts to introduce market-investment options into Social Security or rely on private contractors for certain national-security services—examples, in his appalled judgment, of a more general effort to "prevent the assertion of public purpose and . . . to poach on the lines of activity that past public purpose ha[d] established."

Of course, Galbraith recognizes that our CEO's have not yet, or not altogether, succeeded in realizing their ambitions—and therein lies the glimmer of hope. In his final chapters, he proposes that the federal government, presumably led by a soon-to-be-elected Democratic President, undertake forthwith to reinstate the old three-way alliance among business, government, and labor; to raise wages and to impose price controls; and to set maximum pay standards for CEO's. After all, he concludes, there still are a few redeemable features in American society. "The world needs a financial anchor: the United States provides one. The world needs a scientific and technological leader: the United States has been, is, and can continue to be that leader." And even if our private sector has run amok, we can still look to our public and quasi-public institutions. These remain stable and versatile, awaiting the moment when their regulatory powers can be activated with renewed vigor and firmness.

AT THE outset of *The Predator State*, Galbraith notes that he set out to pen "a short book, lightly referenced, written for a general audience." The resulting volume is indeed relatively short, but less a book than a screed, as light-mindedly argued as it is lightly referenced, and evidently intended for an audience either exceedingly credulous or exceedingly partisan. Worse, though written as a kind of homage to the author's father, to whose writings it frequently appeals, it shows not a trace of the latter's saving wit.

As for the book's thesis, evaluating it is largely an exercise in futility, like catching feathers. Galbraith's generalizations, for the most part unburdened by supporting evidence, are delivered as so many axioms that only a fool—or, what amounts to the same thing, a conservative—would question. Thus, he confidently states that supply-side tax cuts have had no detectable effect on work effort, savings, or investment. Elsewhere he asserts that cuts in government spending are neither a necessary nor a sufficient means toward gains in productivity. Of demonstration there is none. "These," he writes airily, "are the facts now well absorbed by practical policymakers, around whom the vestiges of past conservative verities hang in tatters." Q.E.D.

Discussing our predatory CEO's, Galbraith does not even trouble to inquire whether they might have enriched their shareholders as they were enriching themselves, or what that might suggest about the actual performance of the companies they led—let alone about the discipline and skill they brought to the job or about the improvements they wrought in the lives of their employees. His sole examples of the evil type he decries are Tyco's Dennis Kozlowski and Enron's Kenneth Lay—hardly definitive proof of a systemic problem.

Galbraith is correct that it has become increasingly common for CEO's to re-circulate: according to a recent study by the management-consultant firm Booz Allen Hamilton, one in eight CEO's leaving office in 2005 had previously served as the leader of another company. Yet, contrary to Galbraith's belief, today's CEO's hardly enjoy a free ride, or routinely get away with the corporate equivalent of murder. In 1996, only one in seven CEO's was successfully ousted by his corporate board for performance-related reasons; by 2006, nearly one in three was being pushed out for failing to perform to the board's satisfaction.

But then, such highly pertinent issues as corporate governance, compliance rules, the obligations of boards of directors, and the role played by accountants do not engage Galbraith's interest. Most notably absent from his ludicrously selective portrait are the government regulators who, far from having been swept away by the Reaganite storm, remain charged with responsibility for enforcing a host of laws to insure a fair and level playing field in the securities markets as

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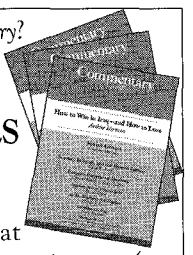



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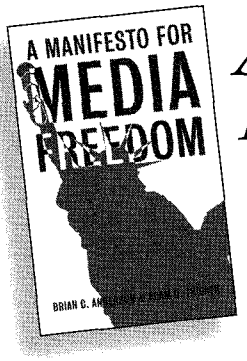


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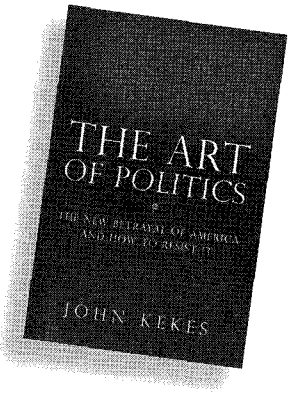


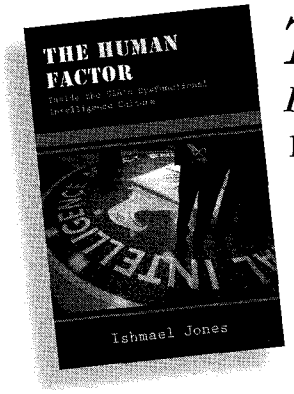


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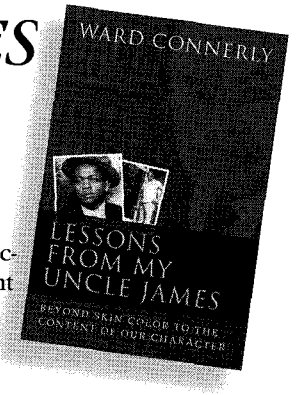


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well as elsewhere in the general economy.

Like many a liberal economist and politician, Galbraith places his faith in the healing powers of government to repair the wounds inflicted by the unrestrained greed of the corporate sector. What about the wounds inflicted by government, or by quasi-governmental institutions like the mortgage giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, now undergoing a bailout by American taxpayers? The anti-capitalist blame game, already tiresome when *The Affluent Society* was published in 1958, is merely farcical a half-century on.

## The Moderate Muddle

A Path Out of the Desert:
A Grand Strategy for America in the Middle East

by Kenneth M. Pollack

*Random House. 592 pp. $30.00*

Reviewed by
Eric Trager

KENNETH POLLACK, director of research at the Brookings Institution and the author of books like *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* (2002) and *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (2004), here tries his hand at a "grand strategy" for U.S. policy in the Middle East. This is, to say the least, an ambitious task. The priorities that drive American policy—promoting stability versus supporting democratization, for example—are often contradictory, and hence constantly in flux. Meanwhile, the sheer number of important relationships maintained by the U.S. in the region complicates any effort to forge diplomatic, financial, and military instruments into a comprehensive statecraft.

It is perhaps no wonder, then, that Pollack has composed a winding and often repetitive book that touches on virtually every major issue, but never in sufficient detail; that effectively delineates America's core regional interests, but fails to acknowledge where they collide; and that promises a new set of principles, but ultimately falls back on well-established ideas that have been implemented inconsistently or ineffectually.

This is not to say that *A Path Out of the Desert* is lacking in virtues. To begin with, Pollack brings to bear an encyclopedic knowledge of American policy in the region, leaving no key political figure, historical event, or diplomatic priority unmentioned. He also makes skillful use of the statistical data that frame his discussion of the Middle East's demographic, social, and economic realities. Finally, reaching deep into the literature on his subject, he cites sources from across the political spectrum to support an analysis that, while argumentative, generally steers clear of blatant ideological bias.

MOST IMPRESSIVELY, Pollack proposes a single framework within which to understand the many challenges confronting U.S. policy. Where Arabs and Muslims are concerned, the story of the modern Middle East, he writes, is a story of failed states. The failure is multiple. Middle Eastern governments have neglected to provide economic opportunities for their rapidly growing populations, which as a consequence suffer the highest unemployment rates in the world (12 percent overall, according to conservative estimates, rising to a whopping 26 percent among fifteen-to-twenty-four-year-olds). Arab and Muslim states also lag significantly in global trade, attract minimal foreign investment, and maintain outdated educational systems that stress obedience and memorization over critical thinking. Meanwhile, dissent is stifled, laws are interpreted and enforced arbitrarily, and corruption abounds.

The result, Pollack writes, is "a populace that is deeply disillusioned, receptive to calls for rebellion, and willing to turn a blind eye to actions they mostly consider immoral." This frustration has catalyzed the regional move toward Islamism, since many Islamist parties provide not only key social services but an escapist outlet for those seeking a return to a "glorious, mythic past." The same frustration has fomented severe domestic instability, ranging from labor unrest among Southeast Asian workers in the United Arab Emirates to ghastly civil wars in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, and Algeria. Finally, writes Pollack, the failure to redress socioeconomic grievances encourages the rise of terrorist groups that recruit from among the region's most disenfranchised and poorly educated groups.

For Pollack, the solution to these failures, and to the threats they pose, is structural. The central thrust of his "grand strategy" is therefore to promote political, social, and economic reform, and his list of desiderata encompasses everything from political transparency, equitable legal systems, far-reaching educational improvements, liberalized fiscal policies, to—in the long run—democratic rule. In encouraging reform, he writes, the U.S. should act multilaterally, gradually, and flexibly. Most importantly, since Washington lacks either the legitimacy or the capability to impose its will on the Muslim Middle East, reform should be instituted principally through indigenous efforts.

NONE OF this is terribly original. After all, the push for political democratization, economic liberalization, and social improvement has been a major focus of U.S. policy in the

ERIC TRAGER *is a graduate student in political science at the University of Pennsylvania. He writes regularly for* COMMENTARY*'s group blog* contentions.



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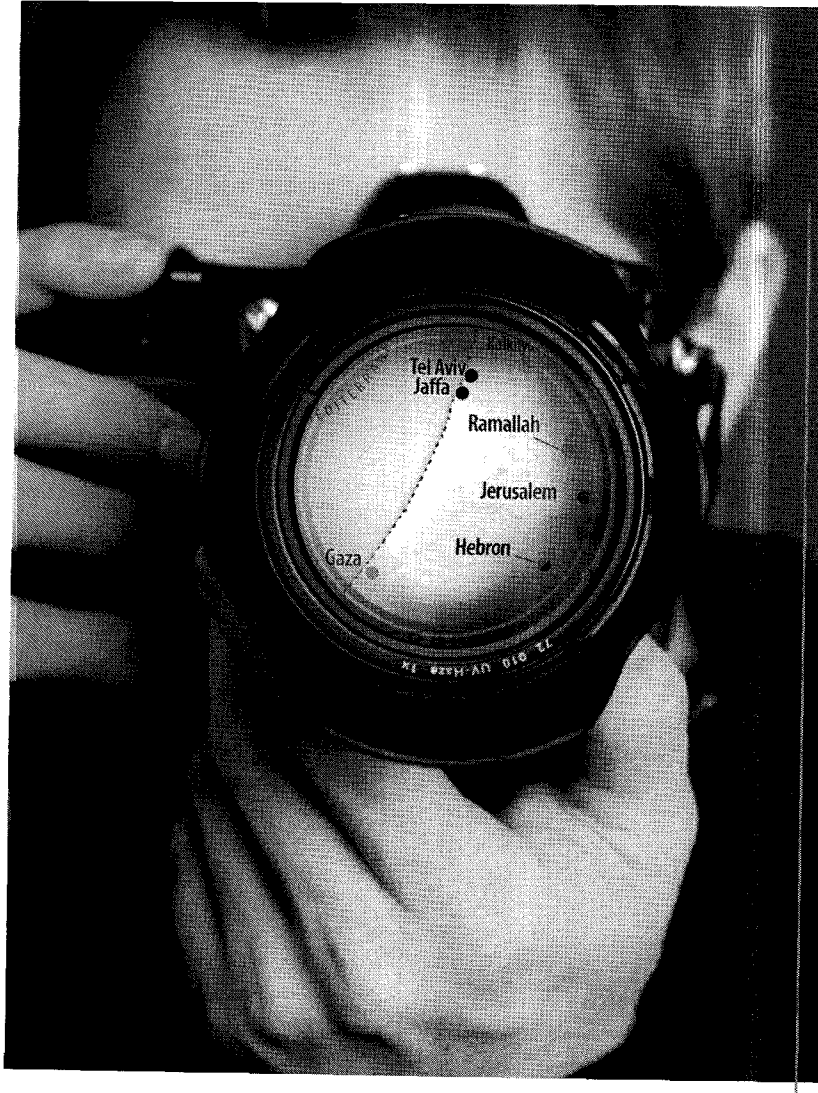


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Middle East for well over a decade. Sections of Pollack's program, he acknowledges, make up what he calls the "Washington Consensus." Still, he is right that these goals have never been pursued consistently.

The Bush administration, for example, retreated rapidly from promoting democracy in Egypt when, following Hamas's victory in the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections, a strong relationship with the Mubarak regime became crucial to isolating the radicals in neighboring Gaza. As a consequence of this about-face, the prospects of indigenous political reform dimmed significantly.

In light of this and other such defects of implementation, Pollack articulates a guiding principle that he would impose on Middle East policy-making. Since, he writes, diplomacy is largely a matter of trade-offs, our "default position should be to make trade-offs in favor of reform unless there is a compelling reason to make a trade-off against it." This is clearly aimed against realists who argue that, to the contrary, trade-offs should always favor stability over reform.

Unfortunately, Pollack gives few specific directions as to how Washington should manage these trade-offs, and his call for using economic aid to encourage reform is neither new nor convincingly defended. More damagingly still, his structural focus misses something fundamental: namely, the role of ideology in fueling the many threats the U.S. faces in the Middle East. Misidentifying religiously or culturally informed movements as mere responses to socioeconomic grievance, Pollack fails to consider the extent to which radicalism is often embraced on principle.

This scanting of ideology also degrades his discussion of "Islamist groups on the more moderate end of the spectrum," among which he includes Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. Thus, he argues that the U.S. should restrict itself to dealing with only those Islamist groups that, among other criteria, accept secular public education and sources of law other than *shari'a*—criteria that, unfortunately, happen to be anathema to the Muslim Brotherhood and other groups on his wish list.

Nor does Pollack weigh the degree to which dealing with "moderate" Islamists would undermine a number of America's primary interests in the Middle East, among them the friendship of Arab regimes that, with Washington's support, have battled Islamist opposition groups for decades. The fact that, like their radical counterparts, "moderate" Islamist groups have exhibited no flexibility whatsoever on the issue of Israel—another top U.S. interest in the Middle East, as Pollack stipulates—is still another and very large complication that seems to escape his notice.

THE MOST that can be said for Pollack's desire to engage "moderate" Islamists is that it is a rare instance of his taking a stance on any specific issue. For the most part he hews to a confounding ambivalence, carefully outlining the debate on a given question while declining to articulate a position of his own. He weighs the costs of staying in Iraq, or leaving Iraq; sees the potential for a limited engagement with Iran, but perhaps not at the moment; believes the U.S. should be active in Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking, but cautions against pushing the parties against their will. And so forth.

As for the "path out of the desert," it would appear to lead straight to Washington, where lofty notions of promoting peace, reform, and democracy in the Middle East are bandied about with gusto, only to be cast aside in favor of more familiar impulses whenever America's

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main long-term priorities—including Iraq, Iran, al Qaeda, the Israel-Palestinian conflict, and the care and feeding of oil-rich autocracies—assert themselves. In this book Pollack himself does the exact same thing, thus mirroring the policy dilemmas he has set out to resolve.

## In the Spaghetti Bowl

### Termites in the Trading System: How Preferential Agreements Undermine Free Trade

by Jagdish Bhagwati

*Oxford. 160 pp. $24.95*

Reviewed by
John Steele Gordon

As the world economy integrates more tightly with every passing week, the global trading system becomes more and more critical to a future of prosperity. That system was developed essentially in the waning days of World War II. The victors, or at least the democratic ones, realized that the beggar-thy-neighbor trade policies of the 1930's—initiated by the passage of the Smoot-Hawley tariff in the United States—had been a disaster, both economically and geopolitically. It had deepened the Great Depression and helped to bring about the most destructive war in history. In 1947, resolving not to repeat this mistake, they formed, under American leadership, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) to negotiate lower tariffs, eliminate non-tariff barriers to trade, and reduce market-distorting export subsidies.

Over the past half-century, in a remarkable series of eight negotiations, these barriers have been greatly reduced or eliminated, with tariffs falling by over 90 percent on average. In 1995, GATT was absorbed into the World Trade Organization (WTO), which currently has 157 member nations and a waiting list of 29 countries. A ninth negotiation has been under way for several years to continue the process begun in 1947.

The result, aided both by the near collapse (thanks to the microprocessor) of long-distance telecommunications costs and by a sharp decrease (thanks to the cargo container) in shipping costs, has been nothing short of spectacular. In 1947, total international trade stood at about $50 billion. In 2006 it amounted to $11.78 trillion, rising at a far faster pace than world gross product, which has multiplied roughly eight times since 1950. Just since 2000, world trade has increased by 88 percent.

Trade—whether between international corporations exchanging billions in goods and services or two neighbors exchanging surplus garden tools— takes place only when both sides benefit. That is why an economy is not a zero-sum game: as we get and spend, wealth is created because each side values what it receives more than what it gives away. Thus, although the exponentially expanding international trade of the last 60 years has caused much local economic disruption, on balance the world has become vastly richer. Much of its current economic travails, including the rapid run-up in the price of oil and farm products, is due to the spread not of poverty but of prosperity.

But Jagdish Bhagwati sees a big problem developing. It is called the Preferential Trading Agreement, or PTA. A PTA is a pact between two or more countries: a customs union, for example, in which the members adopt a common tariff policy toward countries outside the group, or a free-trade agreement in which trade barriers are altogether dismantled within the group itself. He has written a book, *Termites in the Trading System*, to tell us why this is a problem, and why it must be surmounted.

Bhagwati is perhaps the world's leading economist on matters of global trade, and a tireless proponent of more of it. Born and educated in India before continuing his studies at Cambridge University and MIT, he is now a University Professor at Columbia and the author of the most important book on his subject, *In Defense of Globalization* (2004). At seventy-four, he is rich with professional honors and the accolades of his peers. "In the struggle to improve the lot of mankind," the Nobel laureate Paul A. Samuelson has written, Bhagwati has been "a tireless partisan of that globalization which elevates global total-factor-productivities both of richest America and the poorest regions of Asia and Africa."

Bhagwati reminds us that PTA's have been around for a long time—at least since ancient Egypt, which cut a deal with Cyprus to obtain that island's copper and wood. What is now Germany started out as a customs union of states after the end of the Napoleonic wars. The European Union began as a free-trade agreement for coal and steel among France, Germany, Italy, and the Benelux countries. But in the last two decades, PTA's have proliferated at an amazing rate. While there were only a handful in 1960, by 2005 there were well over 200 in operation around the globe.

Bhagwati explains the various factors behind this "plague" of special arrangements. Most policymakers, at least nominally, have been in favor of free trade for decades. But some, Bhagwati writes, are under the illusion that if free trade is good, then *any* free-trade agreement, whatever its implications for the world at large, must be good as well.

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John Steele Gordon, *the author of* An Empire of Wealth *(2004), contributed "Look Who's Afraid of Free Trade" to our February issue.*



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He demolishes this idea in a single sentence: "It was as if an economist were to say, If you wish to cut spending in the national budget, just do it: every cut is as good as any other—a proposition that would soon be recognized as absurd."

If policymakers are afflicted with simple thoughtlessness, for bureaucrats the main danger seems to lurk in narrow self-interest. As Bhagwati notes, free-trade agreements and customs unions always include mechanisms for enforcement and settling disputes, and these invariably come with fancy titles. The more PTA's, the more titles with which to adorn office doors. As anyone who has dealt with government knows, such status symbols can be powerful drivers of official action.

But what exactly is so bad about these proliferating PTA's? One major problem, according to Bhagwati, is that they distort economic decision-making. Instead of trade going to the country with the biggest comparative advantage, and thus the lowest prices, it tends to go to the country that has the biggest comparative advantage *within* the closed world of the PTA, thus propping up inefficient industries by insulating them from competition from elsewhere.

Another deeply problematic element is the chaos that results from the fact that many countries belong to not one but several PTA's, each with its own rules and tariffs. Bhagwati provides illuminating charts for the overlapping trade agreements of the EU in the late 1990's and the Asia-Pacific Free Trade Agreement as of 2007. With good reason, he calls them "spaghetti bowls."

Thanks to globalization, furthermore, it has become increasingly difficult—and often impossible—to design "rules of origin" that make any sense in the real world. The death of Princess Diana serves Baghwati as an emblem of today's economic situation:

> An *English* princess with an *Egyptian* boyfriend crashes in a *French* tunnel, driving a *German* car with a *Dutch* engine driven by a *Belgian* who was drunk on *Scottish* whiskey, followed closely by *Italian* paparazzi, on *Japanese* motorcycles; treated by an *American* doctor, using *Brazilian* medicines.

How to keep track of all this? The rules of origins have made the NAFTA treaty (for example) the size of a phone book instead of a couple of pages long; imagine the mess when this is multiplied by the number of PTA's in the world.

What to do about any of this? Bhagwati realizes that, politically speaking, there are now so many short-term beneficiaries of PTA's that the longer-term benefits deriving from global free trade seem easy to ignore. But that is precisely why political leaders must continue to press hard for globally lower trade barriers through the WTO—for only this, if successful, will make PTA's irrelevant. After all, what would be the point of having a preferential trade deal with one country if all countries were already trading freely?

BHAGWATI WRITES very clearly for an economist, and also supplies a handy glossary of terms to help the reader navigate inevitable patches of jargon. A blessedly brief book, *Termites in the Trading System* demonstrates a truth all too often forgotten or ignored in these days of computer-aided writing: namely, that the importance of a work cannot be measured simply by its length.

Above all, Baghwati remains fully aware that the real world in which politicians operate is the one that economists must constantly consider in tendering their theoretical advice—that is, if they want the advice to be worth anything. For this alone, it is always a deeply instructive pleasure to read him, as *Termites in the Trading System* reminds us once again.

## Right Talk

### Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment

by Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella

*Oxford. 320 pp. $24.95*

Reviewed by
Jeff Jacoby

DOES A right-wing cabal play havoc with the media? Prominent liberals have been insisting for years that it does. In 1998, then-First Lady Hillary Clinton famously branded reports of her husband's affair with a young White House intern as the figment of a "vast right-wing conspiracy." The phrase did not occur to her in the heat of the moment. As early as 1995, White House officials had compiled "The Communication Stream of Conspiracy Commerce," a 331-page dossier purporting to chronicle the way "well-funded right-wing think tanks" and "British tabloids" were using the Internet as a means of getting "fringe stories" about President Clinton "bounced all over the world" and into conservative American venues like the *Washington Times*, the *New York Post*, and the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*. This would in turn supposedly awaken Republican congressional interest, thereby generating "the legitimacy to be covered by the remainder of the American mainstream press as a 'real' story."

A few years after Mrs. Clinton's outburst, former Vice President Al Gore decried the "major institutional voices that are, truthfully speaking, part and parcel of the Republican party." He named names: "Fox News Network [sic], the *Washington Times*, Rush Limbaugh—there's a bunch of them, and some of them are financed by wealthy ul-

JEFF JACOBY, *a new contributor, is an op-ed columnist for the* Boston Globe.



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tra-conservative billionaires. . . . Most of the media has been slow to recognize the pervasive impact of this fifth column in their ranks." Gore's "fifth-column" lament was quickly echoed by a number of leading figures in the media, including Paul Krugman of the *New York Times* ("so clearly true") and the *Washington Post*'s E.J. Dionne ("It adds up to . . . a media heavily biased toward conservative politics and conservative politicians").

In 2003, the leftist media critic Eric Alterman devoted an entire book to the theme of a Fourth Estate dominated by the Right. "Conservatives have spent billions . . . to pressure the mainstream media to move rightward and to create their own parallel media structure," he wrote in *What Liberal Media?* "Unbeknownst to millions of Americans who continue to believe that the media are genuinely liberal—or that liberals and conservatives are engaged in a fair fight of relative equality—liberals are fighting a near-hopeless battle in which they are enormously outmatched in most measures."

All of this fulmination notwithstanding, it is a plain fact that conservatives are overwhelmingly outnumbered in mainstream channels of the news business. Moreover, as study after study has documented, journalists are much more likely than the general public to identify themselves as liberals or Democrats and to vote accordingly. Not coincidentally, opinion surveys consistently find that Americans detect a pronounced liberal bias in the press.

A 2007 poll conducted by Zogby International, for example, showed that 83 percent of voters believe the media are biased, with nearly two-thirds saying the slant is to the Left. In July 2008, a Rasmussen Reports survey of 1,000 likely voters found that 49 percent believed most journalists would try to use their reporting to help Barack Obama, while only 14 percent expected journalists to try to help John McCain. An analysis of federal-election-contribution records by *Investor's Business Daily* provided supporting evidence for this view: twenty members of the working media donated money to Barack Obama for every one who gave to John McCain.

In bewailing the supposed triumph of conservatives over the liberal media, Clinton, Gore, and Alterman are thus sharply at odds with both the evidence and public opinion. Nevertheless, the belief has attained the status of "a new liberal group wisdom" (in the words of the late Michael Kelly, a former editor of the *New Republic* and the *Atlantic*). By 2007, it had become so entrenched that Democratic presidential candidates, under pressure from the party's left-wing "netroots," refused to take part in Fox-sponsored debates—or even, in some cases, to appear on Fox programs at all.

All of which might suggest that a book titled *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* would be another manifesto deploring what conservatism hath wrought. Happily, it isn't.

"To the undoubted disappointment of those on the Left, we have not argued that the conservative media menace the country's well-being," write the book's authors, Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella. The two are professors of communication at the University of Pennsylvania, where Jamieson also directs the Annenberg Public Policy Center. Their book is a scholarly analysis of the most influential conservative media outlets, focusing in particular on Limbaugh's popular radio show, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, and the Fox News Channel.

The mission of these outlets, the authors write, is to defend and uphold the values of Reagan conservatism that most of their audience already shares. In so doing, they create a "self-protective enclave" within which ideologically reassuring information is disseminated to the faithful, liberal arguments are rebutted, and ties to the Republican party are strengthened.

But Jamieson and Cappella do not argue that this process somehow subverts the public discourse, or that conservative voices have swamped the mainstream media. On the contrary: they believe that the conservative media form a parallel on the Right to what much of the establishment media have long done for the Left. "Just as influential representatives of the mainstream media have ties to Democratic politics," they write,

> the résumés of those at Fox and the *Journal* tend to carry Republican credentials. Whereas CNN, NBC/MSNBC, and ABC have drawn high-level talent from the Democrats, Fox has done the same from the GOP.

By the same token, "conservative assumptions are more likely to go unchallenged on Fox's talk shows than on CNN's, and liberals are more likely to be required to defend their premises. The opposite is true on CNN." And if Republican candidates benefit from more frequent appearances on Fox, "there is evidence that MSNBC and CNN provided more interview time to Democrats."

Much of *Echo Chamber* is devoted to inferring the actual impact of the conservative media, especially Limbaugh, on their self-selected audience. Not surprisingly, the authors conclude that Limbaugh's broadcasts may indeed affect the intensity of his listeners' views, but whether this translates into more votes for Republicans in general elections is, they write, a question "often asked and difficult to answer." Perhaps more surprising is the vigor with which Jamieson and Cappella defend Fox News and especially Limbaugh (whose highly



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partisan rhetoric and use of hyperbole and ridicule they describe in detail) from charges that they dumb down their audiences or seal them off from reality, thereby accelerating a decline in political participation.

Limbaugh's fans may enjoy his "bluster and bombast," according to the authors, but behind it "there is a substantive defense of a coherent political philosophy." He makes politics "engaging and entertaining," and one result is an audience *more* rather than less likely to seek out other sources of information. Contrary to stereotype, Limbaugh "dittoheads" consume more print news than do non-listeners. Fox viewers and Limbaugh fans, Jamieson and Cappella note, are also likelier than comparable groups of voters to tune in to presidential debates. Nor does gravitating to conservative media generate civic torpor. Far from making people cynical or indifferent toward public affairs, "Limbaugh reinforces his audience's disposition to participate in the political process."

EARLY IN *Echo Chamber*, Jamieson and Cappella announce that it is not their "purpose to determine whether what is generally known as the 'mainstream' media . . . are indeed 'liberal,' as the conservative media suggest." Perhaps to signal their agnosticism on the question, they repeatedly put the world "liberal" between quotation marks—as if serious investigation were required before the *New York Times*, National Public Radio, or MSNBC could safely be labeled left-of-center.

At other times, however, the authors are not quite so tentative. In the book's closing pages, they concede that the framing of mainstream news coverage "is different from that of Fox and, in sometimes subtle and sometimes obvious ways, more hospitable to Democratic than Republican points of view." And they remind "those who wring their hands over the rise of the conservative media" that while the right-of-center outlets are noteworthy voices in the marketplace of ideas, they are hardly the only ones and by no means the loudest.

Fox News, for example, may be the most popular cable network, but the nightly newscasts on any of the legacy networks attracts a larger audience. Limbaugh may be the top talker in radio, but his listenership is dwarfed by that of NPR. Impressive as the *Wall Street Journal*'s circulation figures are, *USA Today* has 200,000 more readers—and in any case, the *Journal*'s editorial page is read by a distinct minority of those who take the paper.

For Gore and other liberals of a certain age, one suspects, the real problem is not that there are *only* strong conservative media voices to be heard these days, but that there are *any*. They grew up in the age before the cable revolution, before the rise of talk radio, before the Internet—the era when liberal media dominance was a fact of life, and conservatives were rarely seen or heard from. Now the Left has to compete for attention.

Thanks to the conservative media challenge, we have a livelier public dialogue, a more engaged and invigorated electorate, and an array of new sources for news and comment. Do the conservative outlets sound at times like a right-wing echo chamber? No doubt—but hardly on the scale of the left-wing echo chamber in which so much of the establishment media have long been entrenched. Jamieson and Cappella rightly observe that as liberals and conservatives compete in the new media environment, "monitoring each other for bias, [they] add an element of accountability to the system that was missing in the days when the three major network evening shows took their cues from the *New York Times*."

That system will probably never be, to coin a phrase, fair and balanced. But it is far closer than it once was.



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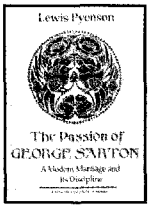


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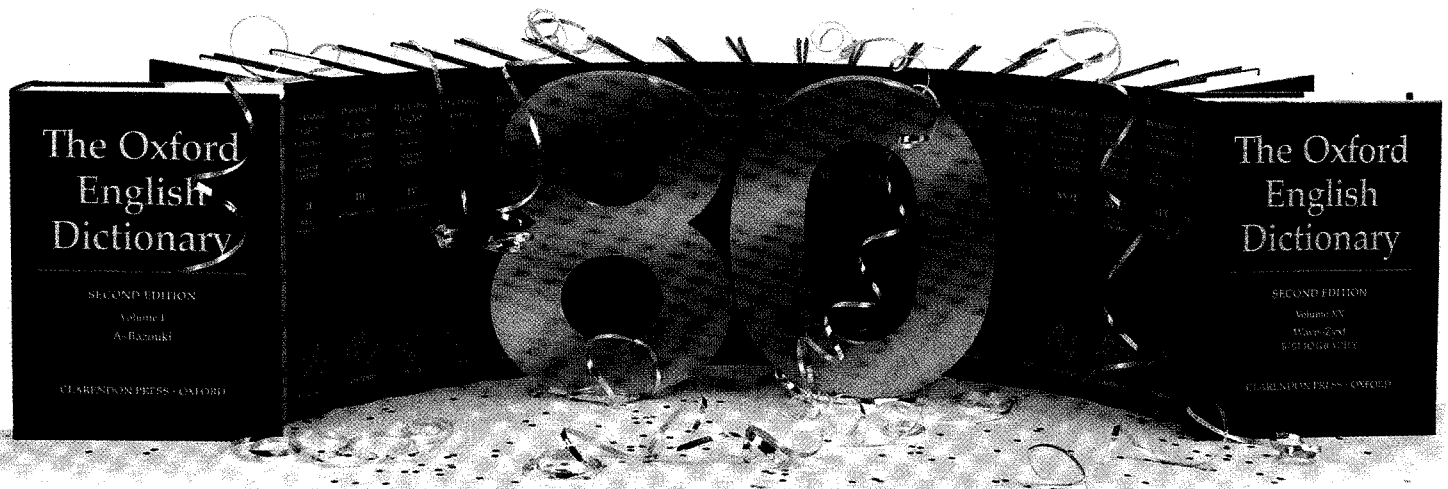


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